

22 October 2016

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FEATURES

No, having cancer did not heal my life

Of all the crackpot theories, that's the biggest lie of all

Henry Jeffreys



Everyone laughed at Noel Edmonds in June when he claimed to have treated his prostate cancer with an electronic device called an EMP pad. 'I believe pulsed electromagnetism has a role to play,' he announced. It wasn't so amusing when he said cancer was caused by 'negative energy', but this kind of quackery isn't that far from the mainstream. Newspapers and bookshops are full of people 'curing' themselves of cancer through broccoli, meditation or acupuncture.

I took a more conventional route when diagnosed with testicular cancer in 2004. I had an operation but it had already spread into my abdomen so I had to have chemotherapy at St. Barts Hospital in London. This means you are systematically poisoned in the hope that the cancer will succumb before you do. I remember the awful sickness and the mania of the steroids used to counteract it. This turns your mind to mush, making reading or even watching television impossible. The summer of 2005 was the bleakest of my life.

Certain people were rays of light: a beautiful junior doctor I would try to flirt with between vomiting bouts, a cheery, gossiping Filipino nurse, the West Indian sister who insisted I get out of bed for breakfast, friends and family keeping me company for hours when I didn't want to talk. I was fortunate that I could stay at my parents' home and that my job was kept open for me.

Others were less helpful. One woman at work, even before offering any sympathy, wanted to know what alternative therapies I would be doing, and seemed offended that I had put my trust in the oncology department at Barts. A writer I know called Felicity Carter had a similar experience when diagnosed with NH Lymphoma: 'I got lots of advice about consuming vast quantities of fruit and veg to "boost the immune system"'. As if a carrot is any match for malignant cells whose speed of division is exceeded only by foetal cells.

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Because cancer treatment is so unpleasant, and often ineffective, it leaves a vacuum to be filled by the likes of Noel Edmonds and his 'negative energy'. The late journalist John Diamond wrote a book called *Snake Oil and Other Preoccupations* examining this nutty, predatory world. Professor David Colquhoun continues the fight on his website descience.net. He notes one woman, Barbara Wren, who claims 'to have cured thyroid cancer by applying external compresses, half an hour with castor oil and half an hour with your own urine'. Aussie blogger Belle Gibson built a career on curing her cancer through healthy eating until it turned out that she had never had cancer at all.

My unhelpful colleague produced a list of woo-woo books I should read. I ignored it. Cancer writing is a growth area (if you'll pardon the pun). John Diamond was the pioneer. He wrote an award-winning *Times* column on his illness until his death in 2001. He was very clear that you don't 'fight' cancer. His first book was subtitled 'Because Cowards Get Cancer Too'. I didn't feel brave either. Positive thinking isn't going to help either, at least not on its own.

It's a peculiarly personal disease: your own cells become malignant and consume you. It's no-wonder that some people anthropomorphise their illness. There's a bestselling book called *The Cancer Whisperer* by Sophie Sabbage about the author's 'relationship with cancer' as if it was a negligent boyfriend.

Its subtitle is 'How Cancer can Heal your Life' and the author claims one can grow and learn from the illness. This is perhaps the biggest lie of all: that having cancer gives you a kind of wisdom. Not long after going back to work, I remember the artist Sebastian Horsley asking me whether I was now a better person. I thought about it and realised I hadn't changed. Cancer didn't bring my whole life into focus or make me count my blessings. Horsley agreed; as a former heroin addict people expected him to have a hard-won wisdom which he simply didn't have. He died a few years later from a drug overdose. Felicity Carter said that when she told a hospital psychologist that 'work is central to my life and I was eager to get back to it, she accused me of "learning nothing" from my illness'.

I was fortunate in that my treatment was successful and I have been clear for ten years. Most aren't so lucky. If someone you know has cancer they need support and love, not advice from magazines and bestselling books. Sympathetic family, friends and strangers (someone gave up their seat on the tube with a quiet 'you look like you need it more than me') are a great help but it's doctors and nurses they need. Please don't pester them about alternative therapies, don't send them an electrical pulse kit and don't expect them to emerge as a saint. Just be thankful they're still alive.

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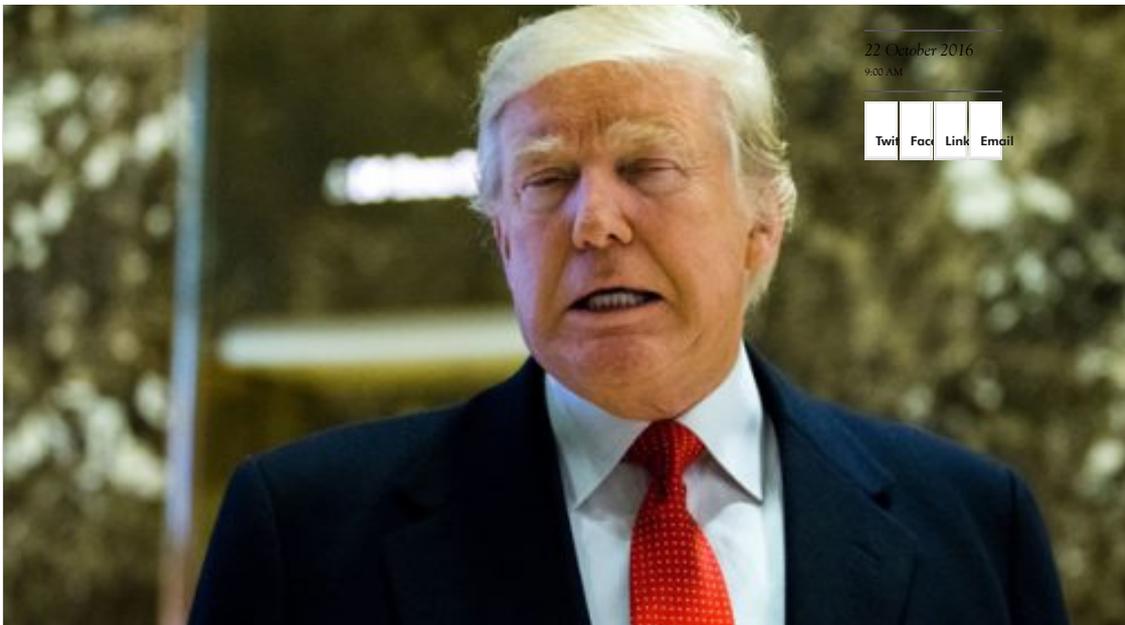
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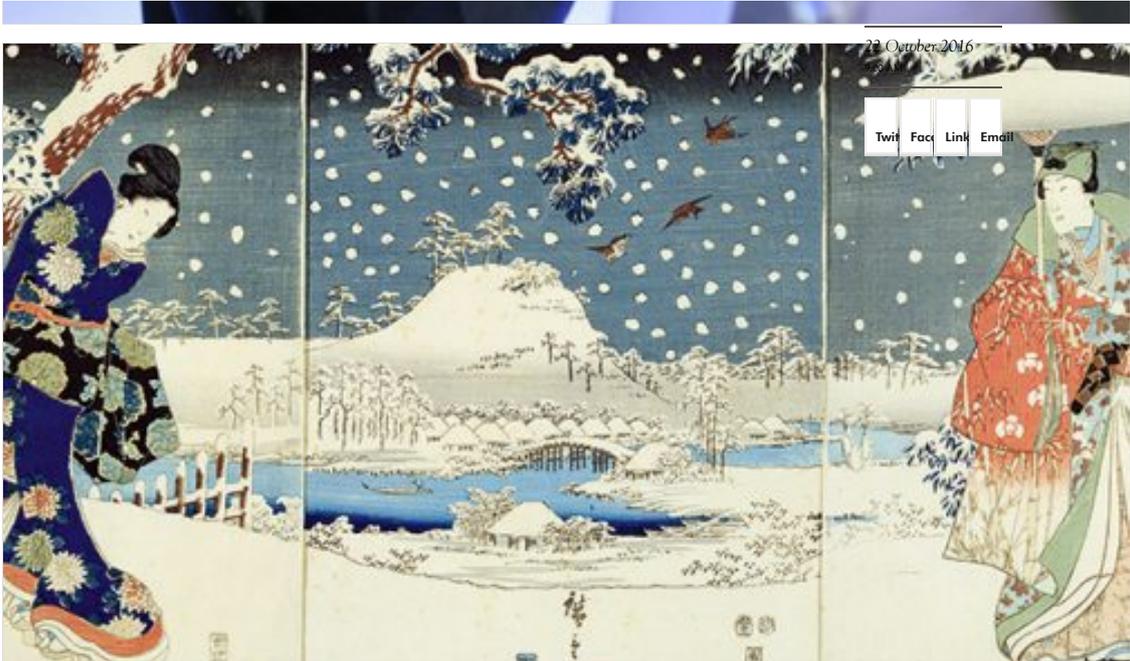
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