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If it is possible to pass through a cancer experience and emerge unchanged, then Greg O'Meara is a living example of it.

Just over two years ago he was diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer. Today, the cancer is gone and the only reminder is a small numb patch on one foot.

He's hardly aware of the numbness and says it doesn't impede the regular 12 km run he does for his triathlon training program. At 41, he feels as fit and as well as is possible for his age.

During the operation to remove his cancerous prostate, a nerve the size of a thin shoelace was removed from his lower leg.

It was then used to replace one of the erectile nerves that he lost during the operation. This graft gave him the possibility of eventually regaining full potency.

After 18 months, life was very much back to normal and these days O'Meara says everything is so automatic, he doesn't even think about the process. In fact, cancer is not part of his consciousness.

"I was never sick and didn't have any symptoms. I never had any of those things one associates with cancer like chemotherapy, radiotherapy and hair loss. I just never felt like a cancer patient. Of course I had a major operation but in my head I rationalized it by saying I could just as easily have been having my appendix out. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have been diagnosed so early."

Just before Christmas of 2002, O'Meara, who runs a hotel in Margaret River, WA, went for his routine annual check-up.

"As part of the check, the GP happened to tick a box to test for PSA (prostate specific antigen). I didn't even know what that was or that he was testing for it."

"Later he told me everything was fine except my PSA was a little high - not hellishly high, but a bit more than it should be. In case it was a maverick score he retested me and got about the same result."

"Although it was probably not serious, the GP suggested I go up to Perth for a biopsy. I remember, it was virtually Christmas Eve and while the radiologist was doing the procedure he was saying it was probably nothing because I was only 39. I wasn't worried."

"Just after New Year, we'd been out to a festive lunch with friends at Vasse Felix, one of the better wineries down here, and we'd all come back to our place. We were sitting around feeling pretty relaxed when the phone went."

"It was Justin Vivien, my specialist from Perth. He said there was some cancer in my prostate. It's hard to describe the feelings but suddenly things became quite eerie."

Vivien, who is a senior lecturer in urology at the University of WA, posted down some reading matter and in their subsequent discussions about treatment options, he suggested O' Meara travel to Sydney for a sural nerve graft. "I was on a pretty steep learning curve so it was all new to me but in the end, the decision made itself."

O' Meara and his wife, who was seven months pregnant with their third child, flew to Sydney and went directly to St George Hospital.

There he was operated on by Paul Cozzi, a urologist who had learned the technique at Memorial Sloane Kettering Cancer Centre, New York, and had performed the first Australian case on his return in 2000.

Cozzi, who is a senior lecturer in surgery at the University of NSW, has since completed more than 90 of these grafts and presented his results at the Australian Urological Society's scientific meeting in Melbourne last month.

He showed that up to 70 per cent of men who lose one nerve and have a replacement graft can expect to recover their potency.

In healthy men, an erection is supplied by two nerves that run down either side of the prostate. If both nerves are spared during radical prostate surgery, there is a 70 to 80 per cent probability the man will retain his potency.

If one is removed, the chance of recovery is only 30 per cent. If both nerves go, the probability of potency is zero.

In younger men, Cozzi says a single graft can mean the difference between needing Viagra all the time and not needing it at all.

In older men, it may mean the difference between a satisfactory erection using Viagra and no erection at all, with the only alternative being penile injections which many couples find unpleasant.

Last year, Manish Patel, a urological oncologist from Sydney's Westmead Hospital, presented the world's largest series of sural nerve grafts - 145 cases - at a meeting of the American Urological Association.

He too learnt the procedure at Memorial Sloan Kettering and says it can take three years for the grafted nerves to function properly.

In the first year the results look dismal. In the second year there is dramatic improvement and by the end of the third year, men generally do well.

Initially this procedure was used on men who had both nerves removed during in surgery. Patel says an "amazing" 40 per cent of these men regained potency after a double graft. On the basis of this success, single grafts were tried.

Cozzi and Patel are now planning to combine their results into one series. They have shown the procedure is safe and effective, with minimal risks of complications.

But, they say it is not suitable for men who have pre-existing impotence or who will need subsequent radiotherapy or hormonal therapy.

When they talk about restoring potency, they mean spontaneous potency without the need for medication or devices.

Although they were prescribed, O'Meara rarely used potency drugs because they gave him headaches. Rather, he and his wife decided to let nature (and science) take its course while they remained positive that it would.

"On the way through we had our fair share of tears and a bit of 'why me', but overall we were very practical in our decision making."

He regards the operation as a comprehensive success and is now doing so well, that from having his PSA checked every six months, his specialist says he need only do it annually.