



Colorectal Cancer

A Return to Normalcy

Grace Gawler's colorectal condition was painful and complex, rendering her ill to the point that she couldn't function. After several failed attempts at treatment over the years, Gawler thought she had reached the end. Then in 2005, an opportunity for treatment in Singapore saved her life

In 1997, Australia native Grace Gawler suffered a complete prolapse of her uterus. Although it was not the first time she had experienced a problem like this, her uterus had slipped so far out of place that a volume of tissue dropped outside of her vagina. The situation left her with no option but to go in for surgery. But following the surgery, her health began to spiral out of control.

"I had a hysterectomy in Australia along with a removal of the damaged tissue," Gawler says. "Immediately after the procedure, I suffered from a total inability to evacuate my lower colon and rectum.

For Gawler, the next three years were the beginning of challenging times, to say the least.

"I developed a mega colon to the point where my colon was close to erupting," she says. "By October 2000, a substantial portion of my large colon had to be removed, followed by a series of surgeries, ileostomies and colostomies, and more colon removal followed."

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Dr. Lim Jit Fong, Fortis Surgical Hospital, Singapore

"I was shocked and in a state of disbelief when this first happened to me. I had been a healthy, independent and robust person as the director of a cancer charity providing support and education for patients and families. Suddenly, overnight, I became a patient. It was a very taxing period."

Gawler suffered leakages and herniated stomas after her failed surgeries. The pain she endured pushed her to search for other options. In 2002, she underwent an experimental procedure called temporary electrical stimulation in the Netherlands, and it successfully restored her rectal function. She then returned in 2003 to surgically implant a permanent Intersim™ device. This was a first time the device was being used to treat her condition, and it was a success – no stoma and bag were necessary. She could finally excrete normally. But one day, the Intersim™ battery died, leaving her in dire straits.

"The device suddenly stopped due to an exhausted battery. I found myself with a shortened gastrointestinal tract from previous surgeries, and no bowel function," Gawler says. "It was nearing Christmas and I couldn't get the medical help I needed. My impaction issues had become horrendous. I spent nights in pain, curled up on the floor with hot water bottles and pain medication," she says.

After an x-ray in January showed a partial blockage in another part of her colon, Gawler knew she had to seek additional treatment. She heard about Dr. Francis Seow Choen in Singapore through her former Dutch surgeon, and talked to him about taking her on as a patient. Dr. Seow quickly agreed.

Gawler responded extremely well to Dr. Seow's treatment. "After nerve stimulation, Gawler improved tremendously, but after a period with the Intersim™ device, she started to have severe constipation again," Dr. Seow says. "After we replaced her sacral electrode, she regained full control of her bowel function and was able to work fully once again. I explained to her that her batteries needed changing. We had to readjust the electrodes so that she would get the best outcome with the least electrical

charge so the battery would last a few days."

Dr. Lim Jit Fong, who worked with Dr. Seow on Grace's case, says Gawler's symptoms reduced significantly, and she only needed to return for a follow-up after six months.

However, Dr. Fong says Gawler's journey to recovery was not easy. As it was Grace's third sacral neuromodulation implantation, there were technical challenges, such as scarring from her previous surgeries, which meant there were limited locations for implanting the device, so the risk for failure was high. There was also the risk that the new implant site may not be as good as the first one.

After the surgery, Grace didn't need to rely on medication to help her, Dr. Fong says.

"She could travel without worrying about bringing large quantities of medication with her," he says. "Grace only came

Dr. Lim Jit Fong, Senior Consultant, Fortis Surgical Hospital, Singapore



Grace Gawler, Queensland, Australia

back to Singapore for reprogramming or to change the settings of the device in order to achieve good control again."

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For Gawler, the chance to return to a normal, vibrant life with the help and care she received from Dr. Francis Seow Choen and Dr. Lim Jit Fong is not something she takes for granted.

"To have arrived in Singapore knowing that my life was hanging on a thread and then meeting the team who were there to help me survive was a humbling moment, but I went into surgery with a tremendous sense of trust," Gawler says. "From the minute I arrived, I felt so reassured. Everyone from the receptionists, nurses, and doctors were all part of an allied team and you could sense it. I had never experienced medicine performed in this personalised way."

Pushing past the negativity from the opinions of her friends and other health professionals, Gawler went the extra mile to find the right treatment, and in turn she received the right team of healthcare professionals who were willing to do the same for her.

"Don't give up hope even when people say nothing can be done," Gawler says. "I am where I am today because of an inquiring mind and that I found the right medical team."

"You never know what might come along to heal you; just be sure to recognise it and not let opportunities pass you by."

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