

Time to mention the C word



In 2010 Chai's co-founder and Life President Susan Shipman gave her personal reflections on the taboos, fears and losses she and Frances Winegarten z'l had to overcome as they established the community's first cancer support charity.

This is an edited extract of an article that first appeared in Together magazine.

It's hard to believe that it's twenty-one years since I received the phone call from Frances Winegarten z'l that would eventually lead to the creation of Chai Lifeline Cancer Care (now Chai Cancer Care).

At the time, Frances was in remission from a rare cancer that was very difficult to treat. She endured high doses of experimental radiotherapy and chemotherapy, as there were no drugs to treat her particular form of cancer.



Susan Shipman & Frances Winegarten z'l

Blessed with a strong character and positive attitude Frances was determined to survive and in addition to conventional treatments, took her health into her own hands, changing her diet and lifestyle. Upon hearing of her recovery, many cancer patients in her community sought her advice and support.

By contrast, I was mother to a child who had been diagnosed with cancer when she was just two years old. By the time Natalie z'l was six and a half, she'd had three rare forms of cancer, three operations, meningitis and gruelling radiotherapy and chemotherapy.

On my many visits to Great Ormond Street Hospital with Natalie, I saw how parents in the Oncology

Department were not coping emotionally and I determined to start a support group for the parents of children with cancer.

Through fortuitous connections that Frances and I had independently with Lady Amélie Jakobovits z'l, Frances and I met, one hot evening in June 1989. Despite our age gap, we were kindred spirits, both touched by a terrible disease, both recognising the importance of emotional support in the healing process. Back then, the treatment for cancer was to cut it out, burn it away, or poison it. The emotional effects for the patient and family were not considered.

Frances convinced me of the importance of starting a support group for Jewish cancer patients. Attending a non-Jewish support group during her own illness, the cultural differences she experienced added to her sense of isolation. It is well documented that in moments of crisis, people return to their roots, regardless of their levels of observance.

By December 1989, we had a committee in place and in March 1990, Chai Lifeline was granted charitable status. We began a telephone helpline run from both our homes and wrote to the Jewish Chronicle (JC) and the Jewish Tribune about the service – but no one called! Eventually a JC article prompted a response – not from potential clients but from recovered patients and family members, volunteering their help.

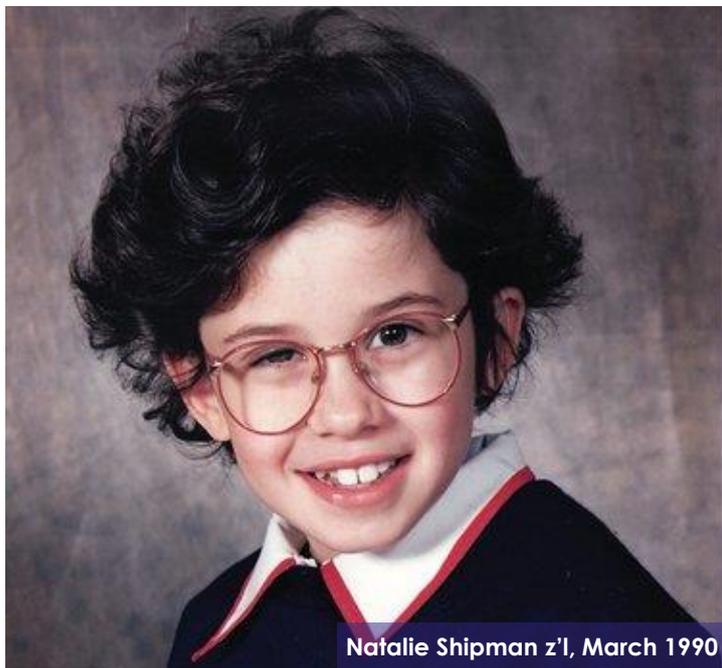
That same weekend, Natalie had a relapse. Great Ormond Street said she had three months to live. I remember sitting in my garden the following week, with Frances and her daughter Louise Hager, discussing why people were not getting in touch.

We concluded that cancer was a taboo subject in the community. If we were to be of help, we first had to take away the fear of cancer: 'the big C', 'the illness', 'the "you know what"' or 'the *machala*'.

In 1990, cancer was rarely in the public domain, the media – and it was pre-Internet. Frances and I felt the best way to dispel the fear was through education, so we organised a public lecture.

The 11th of September 1990 at Norrice Lea Synagogue Hall, marked the first time a lecture about cancer was given by cancer specialists to a lay audience. We put out 200 chairs and stacked 200 more at the back – just in case. To our amazement, 500 people came! It was a hugely successful event. Finally, the calls began to come in.

The week of the talk, Natalie's brain tumour returned. She lost her brave fight against cancer a month later, shortly before her eighth birthday.



Natalie Shipman z'l, March 1990

I was bereft, but at the same time, focused that Natalie's short life must not be in vain. Natalie had talked about helping me and 'Aunty' Frances with Chai Lifeline when she was older. Instead she became the inspiration behind Chai.

We organised three more Natalie Shipman Memorial Lectures funding them by taking over the All Aboard Shop in Golders Green for two

weeks. We raised more than £2500, a staggering amount for a charity shop back then.

We have always felt the Alm-ghty's guiding hand and in response to the growing need, Chai Lifeline expanded at an amazing pace. We were often questioned, however, about the need for a specifically Jewish cancer support group, a criticism that, surprisingly, came from the Jewish, not the wider community, which supported us wholeheartedly. Other minority groups now came to us for advice on starting cancer support groups in their own communities.

In 1993 a Breast Cancer Awareness lecture in Stamford Hill attracted more than 800 from the orthodox community. As a result, several women attending sought medical help. We were gaining credibility in the medical profession, too, and soon had an impressive list of Medical Patrons. From this developed our Medical Advisory Panel, which continues to support and advise us today.

Still, we felt that the amount of calls we received did not reflect the true numbers of those affected by cancer. We concluded that people found it hard to ask for help, especially over the telephone. Our answer? A cancer support centre, where people could drop in to access a variety of services.

With the invaluable help of trustee Ernest Weinstein z'l, who found the premises and supervised the construction, we opened the Chai Lifeline Centre for Health, at Shield House, in 1994. Our plans meant high capital and running costs, for our expanded services and staff. We are indebted to the Trustees of the Kennedy Leigh Foundation, the first major trust to give us financial support, who saw the potential in our fledgling organisation.

Now we had space for counselling, health screening, complementary therapies, a laughter clinic (the first in the U.K.), genetic counselling and lectures. At last, we saw people in need of emotional support begin to access that help, albeit through the 'back door'. They would call to make an aromatherapy or reflexology appointment and once comfortable in

the Chai environment, would start using our counselling services.

Chai's reputation was building. Frances and I attended Government Forums on cancer and were part of a British delegation to Brussels on the topic. Chai was invited to be part of The North London Cancer Network, comprising the five major cancer Hospitals in North West London.

In November 1997, my husband Philip z'l was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour and died two months later. This was a bitter blow, especially after losing Natalie. There were times when I found the responsibility of running Chai and being surrounded by cancer daily, difficult to bear. But knowing so many people were relying on Chai 's support gave me the strength to carry on.

The establishment and success of Chai Lifeline was not without personal cost to both Frances and myself. Frances was immersed in Chai at a time in her life when she should have been enjoying quality time with her husband and family. My involvement also came at a price, especially to my other children, who lost me to Chai when they needed me the most, after the death of their father.



By 2002 Chai needed to expand again. I was delighted to facilitate the purchase of 142 – 146 Great North Way in Hendon, before making *aliyah* upon my remarriage that year. Since then Chai Cancer Care has gone from strength to strength. I am so very proud to have been part of the establishment of such a

wonderful organisation. I am only sorry that Natalie, my Co-Founder Frances Winegarten z'l, fellow Trustees Philip Shipman z'l, Ernest Weinstein z'l and Aaron Winegarten z'l and Honorary Patron Amélie Jakobovits z'l are no longer with us to celebrate this special milestone.

Neither Frances nor I could have imagined that our helpline would transform into one of the foremost cancer support organisations in the country. I sincerely hope that the next twenty years will bring an increase in the cures for cancer and that one day, there will be no need for Chai Cancer Care's services. ■

