

Transcript of "Livet med lungekræft" ("Living with lung cancer")

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Interviewer: Saturday is Lung Cancer Day. It is one of the most widespread types of cancer in Denmark. Every year, it kills more than 3,000 people. How does it feel to be standing on the sideline and witness your father waste away with the disease? How do you handle the inevitable encounter with death? 21-year-old Mette Petersen has tried it all.

Mette Petersen's mother: It's cold.

Mette Petersen: Yes, very.

Speaker: Mette Petersen and her mother on a shopping tour in Copenhagen. Seven weeks ago, they lost their father and husband, Jesper Petersen. In December 2007, he suddenly lost his voice. And he was diagnosed with fatal lung cancer. That is a message almost 10 Danes receive every day. Smoking probably contributed to the disease that killed Jesper Petersen three days after his 50th birthday.

Interviewer: Welcome, Mette Petersen.

Mette Petersen: Thank you.

Interviewer: Today, it's precisely seven weeks since your father died. What was he like before he fell ill?

Mette Petersen: He was a very positive person. He was cheerful and adventurous and he liked to joke with people. He always had a nice smile and he was a really good person.

Interviewer: It must have felt like being hit by a bomb when you received the news of his illness. How did you react?

Mette Petersen: It came out of the blue. We were totally unprepared for it. And then it happened. We were very shocked... Well, we were in shock.

Interviewer: What did the doctors say? Did they pass a death sentence on your father?

Mette Petersen: Yes. He came in and said that my father had cancer and that the cancer was incurable. That he would die from it, and that only two percent survived for five years when suffering from the same type of cancer he has...or had.

Interviewer: Many people might panic and think that this can't be true and refuse to believe such a message. But fairly quickly you began to talk about his death and what was to happen afterwards?

Mette Petersen: We talked about the funeral, which church the funeral was to take place in, flowers and which hymn to sing and what he wanted to wear at his funeral. Just to get those matters settled, so we didn't constantly need to think of it, so we could be a family in his remaining time because we knew that his time was very limited.

Interviewer: How did this aggressive illness change your father?

Mette Petersen: He totally changed. He used to be this cheerful person always joking with people, and suddenly he didn't even want to go out, because chemotherapy made him lose his hair and he was afraid that if he met people he knew they would see how ill he was. And he was very keen to argue...I didn't recognize him. He wasn't my dad. He wasn't like he used to be.

Interviewer: How did you react to that? It must have been very hard to experience that transformation?

Mette Petersen: I got very frustrated. Sheer frustration made me want to...I wanted to hurt him. I made sarcastic remarks because I was hurting so badly myself. I didn't know how to handle my frustrations because I couldn't talk to him about it, really. It really got to me in the last months of his life.

Interviewer: Eventually, you went to see a psychologist. How did this help you? Could you get things off your chest?

Mette Petersen: He helped me by providing me with some tools. I stayed with my parents for a while and lived in a sort of haze. When I came home, I had difficulties doing my laundry or cooking my dinner. I just stood there: "Where to start and where to stop". So he provided me with some tools to say: "Today, I'll vacuum, tomorrow I'll do the dishes..." Everyday I set goals for what I was going to do.

Interviewer: The anger you describe... One might think that you'd want to hug your father forever, but you got mad at him in order to react in some way...Your father smoked and died of lung cancer. Did you hold that against him?

Mette Petersen: I told him that he should have thrown out the cigarettes many years ago. And I threw them in the bin when we received the message. But that didn't really do any good, so... But we got on well during his last months, and we were close even though it was very, very tough.

Interviewer: It must be hard everyday to think that soon he'll be dead. And wanting to tell him things.

Mette Petersen: Precisely.

Interviewer: Many people experience the same thing. What did you think was really important...If a son or a daughter or a close relation gets this message, are there things you would do differently? Advice you can give others?

Mette Petersen: They need to be open about it. And don't hesitate to ask questions and to be there. Even though it may be incredibly hard to be on the sideline with relatives – both as family and friends and co-workers, etc. – it's important to ask questions and show that you're there for them because you need all the support you can get, because it is so hard.

Interviewer: So don't be scared or reluctant...When I prepared this interview, I thought: "I better not ask her that". But you'd rather get it out?

Mette Petersen: I'd prefer to be asked, instead of people not knowing what to say...Go ahead and ask, and then I can decide if it gets too much. Definitely.

Interviewer: I think you're being incredibly strong in passing on this advice to others in the same situation. Thanks for coming.

Mette Petersen: Thanks for having me.