

Alex McKenzie profile

Alex McKenzie has lived a full life in his 72 years.

He has raised a family, served eight years in the New Zealand Navy, toured with VIPs, the Springboks and royalty – all in his place on the New Zealand Police bomb squad – and played rugby until the ripe old age of 45.

He has also had a brush with lung cancer.

And thanks to Alex's own vigilance where his health was concerned – it was just a brush.

Sadly for many New Zealanders, that's not the case.

New Zealand has a lung cancer survival rate of about just 10 per cent – even lower if you are Maori.

Unfortunately, many people don't listen to their bodies the way Alex did and end up being diagnosed with lung cancer in the late stages when curative treatment is no longer possible and making patients comfortable is the best doctors can hope for.

It all started with a simple cold for Alex of Rotorua, in early 2009. He was due for his regular annual check up anyway, so went along to his doctor.

"It was respiratory physician Dr Denise Aitken who picked up on some small shadows on my lung on the chest x-ray," says Alex.

"Because the shadows were so minute, the doctors decided to wait a little while to see if there was any change in symptoms because they weren't sure.

"Three months later, I went through the scanner at Rotorua Hospital and they noticed there had been a slight growth and after consultation with Dr Aitken, I was sent up to Waikato Hospital to meet with the surgeon."

Alex was told there were a couple of options for him, which involved removing only the affected area of the lung, or he could have a lobectomy, which meant removing the top half of Alex's lung giving him a much better chance of getting rid of 100 per cent of the cancer.

Just four months after going to his doctor for a regular check up, Alex had his lobectomy at Waikato Hospital on June 11, 2009. He spent 12 days in hospital and other than having ongoing six-monthly check ups with Dr Aitken, his time in hospital is becoming a distant memory.

"It still surprises me that there was no pain. At no stage did I suffer any pain with having lung cancer," said Alex.

"Not before I was diagnosed, not after the surgery because I was well medicated and not in the days, months or year that has followed.

"I went through life thinking I was bullet proof, spending more than 20 years disarming bombs and training other people in bomb disposal and things like that – nothing could hurt me," he said.

"It was only that I believe in going for regular health check ups and the expertise of the medical staff that has seen me living as freely as I do today."

Following his surgery, Alex has a more limited breathing capacity; however the ex-smoker also suffers chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder (COPD) which also affects his breathing.

"I'm a firm believer in going to the experts for whatever you want. I said to the surgeon, if you want something destroyed or blown up, come and see me; if I want something operated on I'll come and see you. That's the philosophy I have."

Having lived in Rotorua for 39 years, Alex says he is “nearly local” and enjoys spending time with wife Pam, fishing and gardening but knows he is lucky to be living his life and at 72 years old, still runs his own consultancy from home and regularly travels New Zealand through his work.

And he has a clear message about being vigilant when it comes to health.

“Don’t wait until you get sick because it may be too late. For the benefit of your families and yourselves, make sure you have at least annual health check ups and get to the doctor.

“If you have to pay a small fee – so what? Do it. Because it may end up costing you and your family something that money can’t buy.

“I believe that is why my lung cancer journey has been so different to the many others who don’t make it.”