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of US TRISTAN KNOWLES & LUCIANO DALLA POZZA

Tristan Knowles, 28, lost his left leg to cancer when he was nine, and his left lung at 11. With the medical and emotional support of his oncologist, Dr Luciano Dalla Pozza, 57, Tristan survived and now plays in the Australian Paralympic basketball team. The pair remain close.

TRISTAN: When I was nine I was diagnosed with cancer in my leg. Luce was my oncologist, right from when they tried to remove the tumour without having to amputate. After that, Luce took me through two months of chemo, but the cancer was too developed and he eventually told me I had to have the leg off, followed by eight more courses of chemo.

Most people would resent the person who delivers news like that to them, but I connected with Luce straight away. He has this warm energy that makes you feel comfortable and safe. He speaks gently, and he talks to you. He's also very emotional and personal. He'd do little things like say good night every night before he left the hospital; I'd always try to stay awake for that.

I'd have down days or weeks where I'd think the earth was going to fall down around me. But Luce would help minimise how often that'd happen. We'd often joke around; he'd listen to my heart and give me a tickle or something to get me laughing. I never looked at it as a doctor-patient relationship. I just happened to have a mate who knew a lot about treating cancer.

After those eight months of chemo, I went into remission and was on three-month check-ups for two years. On my very last check-up, Luce told me they'd found another tumour, in my lung. That was devastating. I thought I was going to die because nearly every kid I'd known

who'd had a lung tumour had passed away.

I've always been a numbers person, so my first question to Luce was, "What are my chances?" He said, "50-50", and I thought, "Awesome!" When I left the room, he told my parents it was actually closer to 20 per cent. But him allowing me to believe it was 50-50 kept me positive and was, I believe, ultimately what saved my life. That taught me that the mindset you have when you approach an obstacle in life is so important. That's definitely helped me with my basketball – I had coaches early in my career say I'd never make the Australian team because I'm too short, but that just gave me more drive.

When I was in hospital the first time, Luce had a heart attack, then three years ago he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. I thought it was so unfair, considering how many lives he's saved. I've always tried to believe that things happen for a reason, but with Luce I couldn't and still can't. I was overseas when I found out [about his cancer]; I felt completely helpless. He didn't open up about it, he'd just tell me the raw facts. He doesn't like to bother you with his problems; he just wants to help others. That's part of the reason why I feel the way I do about him.

Luce would never think any child he treated owed him anything, but from the day I was put in remission, all I've wanted is to help him give other kids the chance I had at continuing life.

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So I'm working on establishing a \$10-million capital fund for Cure Our Kids, an organisation that supports Luce's oncology unit.

The friendship Luce and I have is special. It's not like we ring each other every week or send each other Christmas presents, but it's a unique connection because I genuinely feel that he saved my life. But Luce is incredibly modest and won't stake claim to any child surviving, and that's something else I really admire in him.

I often think about Luce when I achieve something or when I'm happy. When I graduated from my commerce degree, I sent him a letter. I was in the Australian team that won a gold medal in Beijing, and Mum and Dad rang him straight after the game. I want him to feel that he can have some ownership of the things I'm achieving, because I wouldn't be doing any of them if it weren't for him.

LUCIANO: Tristan came to me as a very scared individual. But he accepted the idea that he would lose his leg with amazing grace and equanimity. When his case was complicated by a reoccurrence, that really challenged us because they're notoriously difficult to cure. But he emerged from a second, prolonged round of treatment and has just grown ever since.

Tristan never took a step backwards; he was very tenacious. The health-care system has improved since then, but we were in an old hospital and he just dealt with the things we threw at him: the prolonged admissions, the toxicity, the dependency on us, the fact that when we said jump he had to jump. He never asked, "Why me?" He just went on with it and had a very positive attitude. People love to look after him because he doesn't complain.

So much of who Tristan is today has been shaped by his experience with cancer. He's driven and motivated and he's excelled in a way that completely overshadows any physical disability he might appear to have. He's got an enormous amount of confidence and he's very comfortable in his own skin. I remember watching him walk with a prosthesis for the first time. He was very, very proud, and he didn't see it in any way other than as an achievement. It was just, "Look what I can do."

It's incredibly humbling that Tristan would imagine his survival is attributed to me; he's achieved things because of him, not because I gave him certain poisons and it cured cancer. He looks at me through thick rose-coloured glasses.

Most patients underestimate their own value, and forget that they've got too much to offer to just give up. But if you can smile at a bird, if you can smile at anything, then there's something in life for you. I never had to remind Tristan of that, and each of his achievements just reinforces the fact that he's very glad to be on earth. Tristan has nurtured my optimism. He reminds me why it's good to be alive.

I can't help but admire Tristan and feel proud of him. Our relationship is very special, but there's no pressure on it. We keep in contact via short emails and we go years sometimes between visits, but when he's in Australia [Tristan now lives in Turkey], Tristan comes to the hospital and we always fall into a regular pattern. There's never that get-to-know-you-again phase.

Tristan has taken an illness that could floor a lot of people and converted it into something that dictates how he lives and what his priorities are. I was around to help with that, and I can die a happy man, knowing what he's achieved. GW