

By Virginia Blackburn

SOPHIE SABBAGE was lying in bed one night in October 2014 when she felt a sharp, stabbing muscular pain in her back just under her shoulder blades. The then 48-year-old, who worked for major companies on issues including leadership seminars, took a painkiller and it went away but she says: "I just knew it was really bad." Sophie was right.

After a raft of blood tests which eliminated the possibility of a virus, she was diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer, which had spread to her lymph nodes, spine and brain.

The prognosis could hardly have been worse but Sophie has now written a book, *The Cancer Whisperer*, about the fact that she has survived longer than anyone thought she would and detailing how to cope on both an emotional and physical level. It turned out the pain was caused by a tumour pressing on the lining of her lung.

Sophie, who is married to John and has a daughter Gabriella, who was four at the time, says her first emotion when she was told what was wrong was not fear but grief. "I always thought grief belonged to big things like someone dying or a big relationship ending," she says.

"But I didn't realise that life is riddled with disappointments and regrets about what you have not done, including writing in my case, that cause grief. As for my daughter, the thought of leaving her is the most devastating thing in my life."

Resident in Kent and treated at several hospitals, including St Bart's in London, Sophie says the doctors "never used the 'D-word' although they did say the prognosis was extremely poor". However the following January, when she was not only alive but had shown signs of significant improvement, they admitted they were surprised.

"In November 2014 I was dying," she says. "I was in pain, I lost my breath walking up the stairs but by January I was starting to feel better and within five months I felt much better."

It is not clear what caused the cancer. Sophie smoked a little "behind the bike shed" at school and into her 20s but cancer is complex and her doctors told her that she hadn't smoked enough for it to be a definite cause. "It's indiscriminate," she says. "People who juice get it, people who smoke, don't."

Instead she believes it is the result of different factors, some environmental and possibly genetic, as well as the fact that she had an eating disorder when she was younger.

In the book she writes the cancer might have been developing for years. "I did not live a healthy teenage lifestyle, I had low self-esteem and a low body image," she says.

THE cancer seems especially unfair because after meeting John in 2007 and marrying him within seven months, Sophie, now 50, was told she probably wouldn't have a child. The arrival of Gabriella when she was 44 must have seemed a miracle and yet within a few years came this dreadful turn of events.

"Having been told that I couldn't have kids and then having Gabriella, I now feel that God gave her to me to make me want to stay," says Sophie. "I wouldn't have stayed without her."

"The will to live is 10,000 times greater, it gets me up in the morning, it makes me take my supplements and allow people to stick needles in my veins as I want to see her again tomorrow."

This attitude may well be one of the things that has kept her going until now. One of her big regrets in life was not writing and so Sophie

HOW I CURED MY FEAR OF CANCER

Diagnosed with chronic lung cancer in 2014, Sophie Sabbage has written a brilliant new book which offers a radically different way of dealing with the disease



POSITIVE: Sophie has survived longer than doctors thought, below, with John and Gabriella

SOPHIE'S TIPS FOR BATTLING THE 'BIG C'

● **ACCEPT** that cancer is not just a physical experience: it's an emotional one too. You will have to deal with fear, anger, helplessness and grief. Sophie says that some people actually die of fear when they are diagnosed and so the right mindset is crucial. "You can live in a state of terror or a state of grace," she says. Don't tough it out and don't fear being a burden. When Sophie was diagnosed she sent an email to all her friends spelling out what she needed from them to help her and that included not telling cancer patients you know someone who has just died of cancer.

● **ONE** of Sophie's doctors said: "Don't become a patient, Mrs Sabbage." She made a point of always coming across as a person, not a patient by, for example, always putting on lipstick when she went to hospital – as if she was going to the theatre instead.

● **DIRECT** your treatment. "It's easy to get caught up in the system and do what you're told," says Sophie. Do your own research, be aware that there are options and don't be afraid to ask for a second opinion. Empower yourself. "They wanted to put me on steroids and I said no," says Sophie. "I didn't want the side effects or to gain weight. We ended up negotiating. They said, 'What if you have a brain seizure?' I said, 'If I have a brain seizure I'll take them.'" She ended up staying off the steroids.

● **DON'T** treat cancer as an enemy. "I really want to change the way we talk about cancer," says Sophie. "People say someone 'lost the battle with cancer' but they never talk like that about other things, such as they 'lost the battle with diabetes'. If someone has terminal cancer you are setting them up to fail right from the

start. Look at David Bowie – he made dying a work of art just as he did with the rest of his life. Cancer is not an enemy, it's an illness and is pointing to what is out of kilter in the body. Relate to it as something to learn from."



● To order *The Cancer Whisperer: How To Let Cancer Heal Your Life* by Sophie Sabbage (Coronet, £14.99) with free UK delivery call the Express Bookshop with card details on 01872 562310. Alternatively send a cheque or postal order made out to Express Bookshop to: Coronet Offer, PO Box 200, Falmouth TR11 4WJ or visit www.expressbookshop.com

has now produced a genuinely remarkable book about the past few years, which combines practical advice with a new approach that turns traditional attitudes to cancer on their head.

She took what she calls an "integrated approach", combining the conventional with natural treatments including Chinese medicine (which asserts that the lungs hold a person's grief) and changed her diet, which she says stopped her coughing up blood.

"Conventional medicine says it doesn't matter what you eat but natural says it does," she said. This meant giving up sugar, caffeine,

dairy, wheat, gluten, alcohol, red meat and carbs, although she emphasises that she cannot tell other cancer sufferers if this will help them too.

By spring this year Sophie had improved so much that she had only a single tumour left in her lung, which had shrunk by 70 per cent.

However in March she discovered she had new brain tumours, for which she has been treated but has not yet received the results.

"It is scary," she acknowledges. "When you're living with stage four cancer it's a chronic condition. But I'm doing all I can to deal with it. My options have not run out."

Picture: ANNABELLE MOELLER