

# PROFILE

## Cancer Research Works, Owen is Living Proof

Owen was a typical kid in Grade 10. His days were spent hanging with friends, gaming, and playing with his dog, Ronald. Owen was also an elite volleyball player, who was always training and perfecting his skills.

So when he first noticed the lump on his thigh, Owen assumed it was a sports injury. It wasn't. It was Hodgkin lymphoma. A follow-up scan showed the cancer cells had already spread to his neck.

### Why don't we have a cure yet?

We haven't discovered a "cure" for cancer because cancer is a complex disease. But thanks to research, many types of cancer now have significantly better outcomes than they did just a few years ago.

Although not every discovery is headline news, breakthroughs are happening all the time. Because they tend to come in small increments, they may not appear to have a direct impact on patient care or outcomes. Make no mistake: these discoveries absolutely do increase our understanding of the 200+ diseases we call cancer, even if they're not "eureka" moments for people outside the scientific community.

Each new bit of information adds another rung to the ladder leading us to faster, more precise detection, diagnoses, and treatments. Lymphoma is one of those success stories.

Lymphomas begin in the lymphatic

system (an essential part of the body's disease-fighting immune system) when healthy cells mutate and grow out of control. Researchers are exploring novel ways to harness the immune system to destroy cancer cells.

For example, immune cells can be harvested from the patient, genetically modified to recognize a specific protein on the cancer cell, then put back into the body to find and kill those cells. Twenty years ago, this might have sounded like science fiction.

Today, it's called immunotherapy and it's one of the most promising areas in cancer research. That said, it doesn't work with every patient or with every cancer. Researchers like Dr. Laura Evgin want to know why.

Dr. Evgin is an early-career scientist at BC Cancer Research Institute and an assistant professor at the University of British Columbia.

"There's so much excitement around this immunotherapy. And clinically, it's been very effective," says Dr. Evgin. "However, there are many patients who fail to respond."

Dr. Evgin recently received a \$450,000 Terry Fox New Investigator Award to study why some patients fail to respond to this therapy, particularly in cases where the cancer cells have spread beyond the lymph nodes.

Whatever Dr. Evgin discovers, it will add more rungs to the ladder of our understanding not just of lymphomas,



Owen, Terry's Team Member and cancer survivor

but of leveraging immunotherapy as a way to treat other cancers, too.

### An investment in hope and healing

In the meantime, thanks to this kind of pioneering research, the survival rate for Hodgkin lymphoma has increased more than 26% since 1975. Today, if you're under the age of 50 at diagnosis, your 5-year survival rate is more than 95%.<sup>1</sup>

In Owen's case, it's been almost three years since his diagnosis. The first year was especially rough. His treatments were exhausting with gruelling chemotherapy sessions that sometimes lasted the entire day. In addition to all the needles (Owen hates needles), there were countless pills to swallow. He developed painful canker sores. And he quickly lost his hair. Owen jokes, "Fortunately, I have a nicely shaped head and a good selection of toques!" In a poignant show of solidarity, Owen's dad and his best friend shaved their heads.

"I was especially worried that I'd fall behind in school," Owen remembers. But he persevered, in part because he was inspired by Terry Fox.

"Terry was a superhero. Many give up when things get tough, but Terry didn't." Owen didn't either. "I knew that I had to get strong and keep up with the treatments, no matter what."

This past spring, Owen graduated high school. He started playing vol-

leyball again. And in September, he headed off to university to study political science and law. “Saul Goodman, from ‘Better Call Saul’ is one of my favourite TV characters. He inspired me,” laughs Owen.

Asked how cancer has changed him and his family, Owen is candid. “We received so much kindness when I was sick.

Now, we try not to sweat the small stuff. And we give back with random acts of kindness and donations to charities like the Terry Fox Foundation so the research can continue.”

### **Your donations bring innovative research to life**

Thanks to people like you – people who support innovative cancer research – Owen is a cancer survivor.

Join us in the relentless pursuit of a world without cancer.

*Written by Kris Wallace, Senior Writer,  
Terry Fox Foundation*

*For four decades, Terry Fox has inspired*

*people from around the world to participate, volunteer, fundraise, and donate in Terry’s name. When you give to the Terry Fox*

*Foundation, you support world-class cancer researchers – like Dr. Evgin – through the Terry Fox Research Institute where your donations are invested in big risk, big reward projects under the leadership and vision of the very best cancer researchers across Canada.*

