



## This mother endured 11 years of pain fighting leukaemia. Now her little boy has cancer.

# 2 SHOTS TO THE HEART

**JOHN AFFLECK**

THIS was to be a story of faith, hope and determination to defeat an enemy so aggressive and invasive that it was killing other patients in the ward while Fiona Johnson suffered her lowest moments in the battle for her life.

Fiona beat the odds. She joined a remarkable club – that of those who survive acute myeloid leukaemia.

But when the phone call was made this week to talk about her battle and the book she wrote to pick herself up while she was ill, to give others a grasp of the hell on Earth patients endure, and to offer hope and to tell of the absolute joy she now takes in living and loving life, Fiona and husband Matt were grappling with another battle that has taken over their lives.

Their little son Beau, 5, has been diagnosed with lymphoma.

Having been through an ordeal that began in September 2001 and involved treatment that continued until only last year, Fiona – of Dungay, 6km outside of Murwillumbah – has again had to uproot her life and move with Matt and their young family into a Childhood Cancer Support Village unit near the Royal Children's Hospital in Brisbane, where Beau has just finished the second of six



chemotherapy treatments to be staged over six months.

He's doing fine, his dad says, in the style of a proud father who watched his young wife weather the storm of serious illness and now, battle-hardened by that decade-long experience and his background in rodeos, is calling on all those reserves of tenacity to tackle a new fight.

Beau's lost weight, he says, but adds that he's going to the school set up at the hospital which big sister Mahli, 7, also attends, although she and dad manage to return home to Dungay for two days a week to go to school there.

Mum Fiona is a little more circumspect.

Beau, she says, has only managed a few days at the hospital school while well enough to attend.

He was due to start "kindy" in NSW this year, the equivalent of prep in Queensland.

"He's been up and down," she says. "Emotionally he's been withdrawn. It was quite traumatic. He had to have a lot of needles, but in the last two weeks he's started to relax a little bit, which has coincided with us moving into this unit.

"To look at him today, apart from his bald head he's great."

Beau started having fevers and a swollen underarm just before Christmas. He'd had a big splinter in his hand a few days before – probably not that unusual for a youngster tearing around the property in the lush farmlands just over the range from the Currumbin Valley.

Antibiotics failed to fix the problem so he was admitted to the Tweed Hospital but, by New Year, was so ill he had been moved to Brisbane where a biopsy on a lymph node revealed he had an aggressive form of lymphoma.

"We wish we knew," Fiona says, a note of frustration in her voice as she talks about mystery surrounding the origins of these diseases that seem to strike randomly against otherwise healthy people.

"I felt guilty at first, thinking is it related, have I passed something on? The doctors said not at all, there are no links between the diseases."

If her husband can be deemed battle hardened, then Fiona's strength is forged like steel from the fires of adversity in an ordeal that laid bare the truth in her case of the saying "what hurts me makes me stronger".

She too is a rodeo competitor. She was named National Rodeo Association Rookie of the Year in women's breakaway roping in 2005 – amazing, given it had not been that long since she went into remission from her leukaemia and the ongoing treatment she was put through until last year.

But add to that the even greater miracle in having fallen pregnant with Mahli that year, despite the punishment her body had taken from the disease and intensive chemotherapy treatment.

Fiona Johnson is tough, but not so hardened that there weren't moments of doubt, when she felt so low that she contemplated tearing

the drip from her arm and trying to run away from the blood cancer and the hospital that had become her prison.

Like Beau, Fiona was struck by a mystery disease that would not go away. She and Matt went on a holiday to Thailand and Hong Kong in 2001 and she became sick. Over seven weeks she went to different doctors who decided she'd picked up a virus in Thailand and suggested she go home and get over it.

Then one day Matt arrived home at their property, then in Tallebudgera Valley, and found her in agony. He bundled her in his arms – the pain for her was excruciating – and carried her to the car, racing to the John Flynn Hospital at Tugun where doctors initially thought she had malaria, but discounted that the next day.

Fiona had developed reactive arthritis. A week later she was transferred to the Mater Private Hospital in Brisbane where she met Kerry Taylor, the doctor who finally diagnosed acute myeloid leukaemia and who saw her through the highs, lows and risky decisions of the next decade.

It was December 1, 2001, and the then 25-year-old learned she probably had less than two months to live.

"I lay back in my bed in the haematology ward," she writes in her book, *My Wild Ride*.

"Like most people in the ward, I had a hospital room to myself. The rose-pink walls and dark-stained



timber cabinets were old-fashioned and seemed to clash with the harsh steel stands that held the IV drips and monitors that I was hooked up to.

"Beyond my window was the river. Matt was sitting on my bed next to me, his arms carefully wrapped around my fragile body, tears streaming down both our faces."

Several years before, early in their relationship and when Fiona was about to embark on a world trip with one of her girlfriends, Matt had pinned a golden guardian angel to the lapel of Fiona's denim jacket as they said their farewells at the airport.

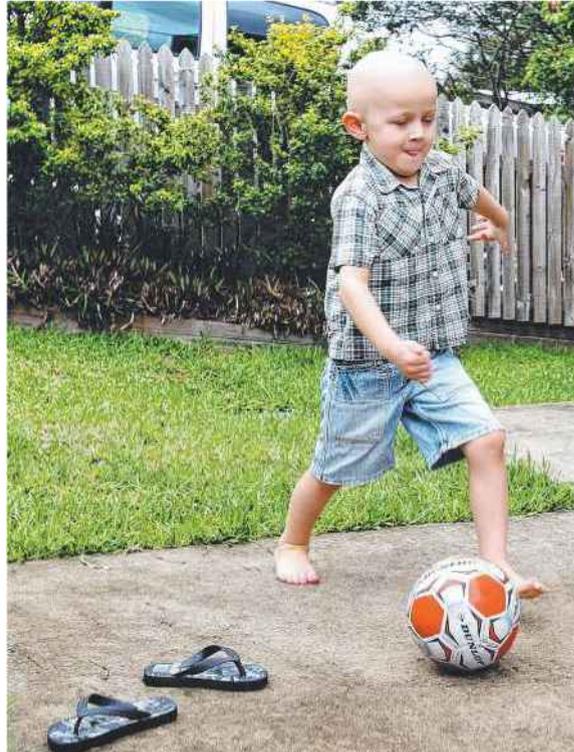
"He said it would keep me safe and remind me of him," she writes of that moment. "I wore the angel every day."

Years later, when her hair had begun falling out due to the chemotherapy and she had her head shaved, Matt produced the angel again and pinned it to the bandanna she took to wearing.

Fiona hesitates as she contemplates the idea this week that she might have had a guardian angel looking over her throughout her illness.

"I do believe in God," she says. "All the way through I kind of felt I wasn't alone. I just needed to have faith, I was going to be OK."

The survival rate for her disease is about 30 per cent. Once she had been through six months of treatment and had gone into remission, it improved so that her chance of long-term survival – five years – was about 50 per cent.



“If you get to 10 years, it might be a 10 per cent chance of relapse,” she says.

Now, aged 36, Fiona has reached 11 years in remission.

Her purpose through her book, begun in sickness and added to over the years as milestones passed – rodeos, children – is to give hope to others who have undergone or are going through the sickness she endured or other diseases that demand similar treatments.

“There’s still a stigma today about cancer,” she says. “People think it’s a death sentence.”

Fiona’s other purpose then is to educate and to shake not just patients but everyone into action, to encourage them to chase their dreams.

Hers, from childhood, had been to marry her Prince Charming, buy a property near the beach, have horses and two children.

“Life doesn’t go on forever,” she says. “But even if you’ve got 50 years left on Earth, think about it. Don’t think anything is out of bounds. Do it now.”

Fiona and Matt have been living the dream.

Two kids, a property, the surf nearby, rodeos, teaching riding lessons and training horses – life is there to be lived.

But for the moment, all that has gone on hold while they help their little boy.

***My Wild Ride* by Fiona Johnson**  
**(Publisher: Allen & Unwin, RRP:**  
**\$29.99) is out now.**



Fiona Johnson, who has been in remission from leukaemia for 11 years, watches her son Beau, 5, play, and, below left, joined by her husband Matt. The tight-knit family now faces another huge challenge after Beau was diagnosed with lymphoma. Photos: MARK CALLEJA

