

Children Fighting Cancer

The series begins 12 June 2007, 10.35 pm on BBC1

From the shocking revelation of diagnosis, through the intensive chemotherapy which begins immediately and all the way through to a final discharge, *Children Fighting Cancer* is packed with triumph and tragedy as the children undergo risky bone marrow transplants, suffer serious side effects from their treatment and pick up infections as their immune systems are depleted.

The treatment for acute lymphoblastic leukaemia (ALL) is scary and shocking for children to endure. Intensive chemotherapy is started immediately after diagnosis and is administered for an initial 28-day period. Although ground-breaking techniques now make it possible to tailor the ongoing therapy to each child, the children still face up to two or three years of hospital visits and treatment.

Interwoven with their stories is the science that's generating hope and excitement for the future. Leukaemia Research funded Professor Mel Greaves, who has spent 30 years researching how leukaemia develops, appears in the series and has advised the programme producers.

Programme 1: Charlotte and Andrew (12 June, 10.35pm, BBC1)

Every day six teenagers discover they have cancer. Teenage life is challenging enough, without having to manage a life-threatening illness as well and programme two follows Charlotte and Andrew as they battle the disease.

Fourteen-year-old Charlotte Adams is an aspiring actress. Her promising acting career, with roles in musicals and the BBC series *Doctors*, is disrupted by the discovery that she has leukaemia. And the news gets worse when she learns that her particular case is complicated by a rare genetic abnormality which reduces her chances of survival to 30% and means a risky bone marrow transplant is the only available treatment.

Andrew Stewart from Dunfermline in Scotland is fifteen years old. He is in the middle of school exams when he is told he has leukaemia. Dealing with a threat to his own mortality at fifteen is tough for him to take in.

Charlotte and Andrew battle on, determined to beat their leukaemia, but for one of them the outcome is tragic.

Programme 2: Ellie and Andrew (19 June, 10.35pm, BBC1)

Programme two starts with the shock of diagnosis as two children and their families discover the terrifying news that they have leukaemia.

Ellie Bristow from Barnsley is six years old. When her parents take her to hospital for tests to investigate the cause of her aching joints and tiredness, their doctor diagnoses leukaemia. In Tunbridge Wells, fifteen-year-old Andrew Martin has just heard the same news. He struggles to take it in.

The film shows Ellie, Andrew and their families coming to terms with the shock and the disease. With humour and an unfailingly positive attitude, both children learn to cope with

gruelling chemotherapy treatments, complicated side effects and with losing their hair. They are taking the first few steps on the long journey towards beating leukaemia in the hope of being among the 80% of children who survive the disease.

Programme 3: Olivia and Zakk (26 June, 10.35pm, BBC1)

The shock of the initial diagnosis has sunk in and this is a film about the long haul: typically two years for girls and three for boys.

Olivia Murphy from Bromley is a cheeky three-year-old who loves dressing up. The intense treatment regime every child must go through in the first year is taking its toll: Olivia's hair has fallen out, her growth rate has slowed and she finds walking hard. She is in and out of hospital with infections. To make things more difficult Olivia has an identical twin, Isabella; a constant reminder of the long blonde hair and rosy cheeks Olivia used to have. But Isabella is threatened by leukaemia as well: identical twins carry a matching genetic marker that scientists have discovered is one of the reasons children get leukaemia. This discovery is tough for the family, but it's also a key to finding a cure for the disease.

In Birmingham we meet thirteen-year-old adrenaline junkie Zakk Hutton. Before being diagnosed, he spent every spare moment motorcross racing, diving or skiing. But now the only vehicle he rides is a mobility scooter around ASDA. The chemo has attacked Zakk's joints; he can no longer write or walk upstairs.

Zakk and Olivia live for the end of this intensive phase of treatment. After this punishing first year, life should begin to return to normal. But for Olivia, the return to normal treatment brings more problems and, in addition, her parents have an agonising time ahead as they wait to see if Isabella will develop the disease.

Programme 4: Jack, Jake and Jasmine (3 July, 10.35pm, BBC1)

The final programme follows children threatened with a relapse of leukaemia.

Seven-year-old ardent Arsenal and McFly fan Jack Doyle lives in Ashford with Mum, Dad and sister Kayleigh. He was diagnosed with leukaemia when he was five. Weeks away from the end of his treatment doctors discover it has returned. The family are told that the only possible cure at this stage is a bone marrow transplant. Tensions rise as Jack's family have their blood tested to see if any of them can be a donor for Jack. There is a one-in-four chance that Jack's pink-obsessed sister, Kayleigh, will be a match – something that Jack, who hates all things girly, is not best pleased about.

Jake Winkworth, is fourteen-years-old and from London. He too faces the horror of relapse. He first had leukaemia when he was six. Initially his battle with the illness went well. But five years after finishing treatment, and approaching the final all-clear, a routine test has revealed that his leukaemia has returned. Older and wiser, he knows all too well what lies ahead as he faces months in hospital and radiotherapy treatment.

Jake's situation is the worst nightmare for sixteen-year-old Jasmine Shaw. Almost at the end of her two years' treatment, Jasmine's life is returning to normal. It's a happy time, but also a fearful one. The years of constant monitoring, safe in the arms of Birmingham Children's Hospital, is nearly over. She has to face life after leukaemia with the fear of relapse hanging over her.