

# My baby was dying... but I refused treatment

*Faced with the bleakest of outcomes, Pia De Jong made a drastic decision. What happened next will leave you stunned...*

**G**azing at my daughter, I try not to cry. At just three months old, her face is gaunt and tumours cover her delicate skin. You might think I'd be pleading with doctors to do something - anything - to save my child, but the truth is, I did the opposite...

When I fell pregnant with Charlotte in November 1999, my husband Robbert and I were overjoyed. Already parents to boys Jurriaan, then three, and Matthijs, one, we couldn't wait to meet our little girl.

I gave birth in July 2000 and, as Charlotte's cries filled the room, I felt full of love. But the midwife noticed something odd. There was a small lump on Charlotte's back which, when pressed, turned blue.

Call it mother's intuition, but somehow I knew that something was terribly wrong. The midwife tried to explain the spot away - it was probably a birthmark - but from then on, I was on edge. When I changed Charlotte, or when I put her down for a nap, I'd examine the spot on her back.

## Just the beginning

In the days that followed, another spot appeared - then another. Robbert was worried too, so we went to the hospital, where a biopsy was taken of the strange lumps. A week later, we returned for the results. 'Charlotte was born with a rare but extremely dangerous form of leukaemia,' said the consultant. 'In newborns, it's almost always fatal.'

I didn't scream, I didn't even cry. In fact, the first thought I had was that his voice sounded rehearsed, as if he'd practised what to say. I remember wondering if he'd done this before.

I was desperate for answers. Why was this happening to my daughter? But we were sent away, with an appointment to see an oncologist the next day. Back at home, we forced smiles for the boys, but in bed, we held each other and sobbed.

And, walking on to the cancer ward the following

morning, I swallowed away my tears as we passed children lying in their beds, covered in machines and wires.

We were led into a private room where the oncologist greeted us. He began explaining about how they could treat Charlotte. The only thing they could offer her was chemotherapy, but as he reeled off a list of terrifying side effects - from infertility to impaired growth to blindness - I felt my whole body go cold.

At less than a month old, Charlotte was already desperately unwell. And now, the only option was to pump poison into her body. If she did live, she could be trapped in a living hell.

I barely realised what I was doing as I slowly put on my coat and picked up my handbag. I glanced at Robbert, and the reassuring look in his eyes told me he would follow. 'What are you doing?' asked the doctor. 'We're going home,' I replied.

No one had to say it, but in that moment we knew - we weren't going to put Charlotte through any treatment. I still maintain that I saw the doctor breathe a sigh of relief, as though he agreed.

I know to some people it will sound like an unbelievable decision. Surely as a mother you'd try anything to save your child. But with the risks of chemotherapy so horrifying, I couldn't watch Charlotte suffer.

I knew that we were doing the right thing but, back home, all I could think about was the day I'd lose my daughter forever. So I began preparing for her death. I wrote a letter explaining Charlotte's diagnosis and sent it to family and friends. Then I bought books on grief for the boys and began seeing a psychiatrist. Robbert and I even went to pick the spot where our daughter would be buried.

Each day, Charlotte grew more spots on her skin - these were tumours. Every time I put her to bed, I wondered if she'd wake up in the morning.

But then, when Charlotte was four months old, I watched as her big brother, Jurriaan, danced around her cot. It was then a tiny giggle escaped from her mouth and, in that moment, something



inside me just snapped. If Charlotte could smile, why couldn't we? We had to make the most of the time we had left.

So we started buying a birthday cake on the first of every month – Charlotte was still here, so we had reason to celebrate. And it was as though she noticed our change in attitude. The more she grew, the stronger she seemed. Her cheeks grew pinker and her cry seemed louder. At five months she rolled over, and at eight months she pulled herself up. Was this strong baby really the same one that was dying of cancer?

Then, in April 2001, when Charlotte was nine months old, Robbert and I were bathing her when he gasped in shock. Stunned, he explained that the spot on her back – her very first tumour – had disappeared. It seemed too good to be true, but after seeing her progress so well, we couldn't help but wonder – was our daughter getting better?

## Hope at last

There was no explanation for it, but in the weeks that followed, the tumours on Charlotte's skin continued to disappear. Then, after her first birthday – a milestone we never thought she'd reach – I took her to the oncologist. As he examined her, he turned to me, a huge smile on his face. Her tumours were gone – Charlotte was in remission.

As the tears rolled down my cheeks, the doctor pulled me into a hug. Blood tests confirmed it, somehow, our girl had cured herself. I called Robbert – who was away with work – and he immediately rushed home. Together, we gazed at Charlotte in awe, our little miracle.

In the months and years that followed, I still couldn't quite believe what had happened. I'd often check Charlotte's skin for spots. But every milestone – from her first day at school, to sitting exams, to the day she got her driver's licence – was a reminder of just how far she'd come.

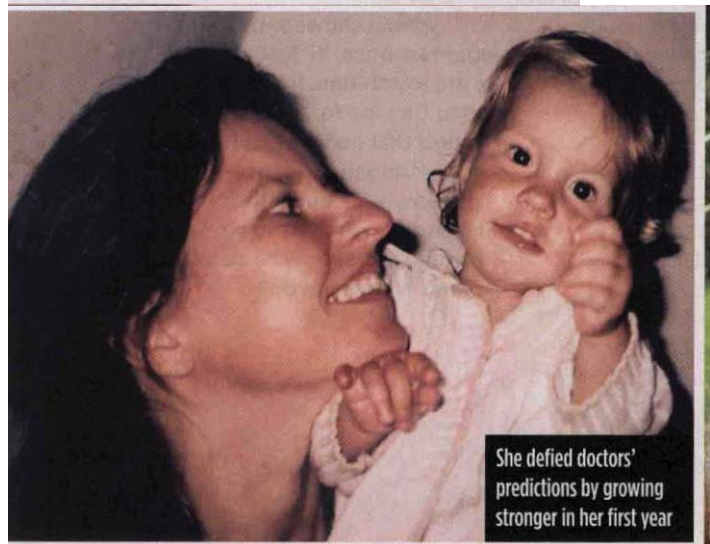
Now, Charlotte is 17 years old. Her story has led to further studies on leukaemia and I often wonder if she holds the key to finding a cure. But, for now, she's happy and healthy. She loves drawing, playing hockey and spending time with her friends.

Sometimes, I look at Charlotte and I still can't process what happened. I'll never regret my decision to withhold all treatment – my little girl was a fighter, and she beat cancer all by herself. ☺

**'I COULDN'T WATCH HER SUFFER'**



Charlotte was born with a rare form of leukaemia, usually fatal in newborns



She defied doctors' predictions by growing stronger in her first year

