

Let's be honest about illness

A cancer diagnosis left **Julie Heathcote** acutely aware of how tough the TV industry can be



Glyndebourne Opera Cup: Sky Arts commission helped keep Factory afloat



THE CHALLENGES of running a regional indie are not always the ones you imagine. When we started Hove-based Factory Films, we thought we'd have problems winning commissions, finding

staff and paying the rent. That was just the start.

In October 2016, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. That is harsh news for anyone, but as a single mum co-running an indie, I knew times were going to be tough.

An initial simple diagnosis became much more complicated, with multiple operations – unfortunately, lots went wrong – and the full smorgasboard of treatments left me in a pretty sorry state. In all, it's been three years of intermittent hospitalisation, which has only just finished.

So how do you handle it when a key team member is out of action? Right from the start, my business partner, Lisa Fairbank, and I decided that the only way to deal with my illness was to hide it. Convincing commissioners to work with us was hard enough without them thinking the company would grind to a halt without me, so Lisa worked twice as hard, and I did what I could. We survived – and ultimately thrived – but it has been hard.

What was surprising was how little financial help is available for the self-employed and freelancers in case of illness. I was lucky that during this time, Sky Arts commissioned Factory to

produce the *Glyndebourne Opera Cup* – a live opera competition. It was a joy to work on, but I sometimes had to leave meetings to take phone calls about results. I'd book biopsies around filming and timetable operations around production schedules.

It was a challenge, but also it kept me sane as there wasn't time to fret. In the freelance and self-employed world, a long-term illness can sink you and I considered myself lucky to survive and stay solvent. It bankrupts many people.

Convincing commissioners to work with us was hard enough without them thinking the company would grind to a halt without me

What became clear was the vital role that employers – even small companies like Factory – have in supporting staff and freelancers alike. We've helped people through health concerns, mental health issues and transitioning, along with the everyday stuff of pregnancy, parenting and caring for elderly parents.

How you manage to be a kind and decent employer with budgets shrinking and production demands increasing is hard to figure out. The truth is, we take on these financial costs and try to be flexible where we can, because that is the kind of company we want to run, and the kind of place we want to work.

GET YOURSELF COVERED

Before I was diagnosed with cancer, I'd pondered whether critical illness insurance was affordable and needed. The monthly cost always seemed too high.

However, I realised that I didn't actually need a big lump sum; I just needed an amount that could cover the basics of living for six to 12 months. That meant the monthly payments were relatively small.

I signed up one month before I was diagnosed, which was some kind of fluke, and that money was a huge help. I used Royal London and they were lovely, but there are lots of companies out there to choose from. Macmillan also offers brilliant financial advice.



Still smiling: Julie in hospital

But perhaps we, as an industry, need to be more open about the fact that production teams are made up of real people, with illnesses, disabilities, caring responsibilities and lives outside the TV world that do, from time to time, take precedence. ③

► Julie Heathcote is creative director of Factory Films