

Breast Cancer – my Experience with NT Health System

In January 1999, on my way back from Melbourne to Elcho Island where I worked as a teacher, I stopped off in Alice Springs to visit my daughter and attend the BreastScreen clinic for a mammogram.

Early in February I received a call from the BreastScreen radiographer in Alice Springs advising me of something untoward in the mammogram, and a recall clinic appointment was made for me in Darwin. Return airfares and one night's accommodation was paid by Territory Health.

Following the recall visit I returned to Darwin 2 weeks later for day surgery, (biopsy) which turned into a 2 night stay at the Darwin Private Hospital, which is where the surgeon, to whom I had been referred, practised.

This was all at my expense.

The surgeon came to see me on the following night after surgery and simply said the prognosis is not good, so we'll have to take the breast off. Absolutely no discussion took place with me and anyone deemed important, eg my daughters. No time for questions or counselling, etc.

My response to that was that I would be seeking a second opinion from a breast surgeon in Adelaide. No effort was made by hospital staff to assist me with this request. The hospital surgeon simply did not offer to contact the specialist in Adelaide.

It was awesome what I was left to deal with. My doctor on Elcho became my saving grace. Within a week she had my airfares booked, and an appointment for me with the specialist. Each day she would call daily at my house to check how I was faring. But no calls from anyone in Darwin.

I flew to Adelaide mid-April 1999, with all expenses paid by me as it was deemed that it was my choice to get a second opinion and travel interstate.

In Adelaide I underwent further tests – catscan, MRI, blood tests etc, before undergoing two more bouts of surgery in April– a partial mastectomy and in July, a breast reconstruction. After recuperation with friends, I had 6 weeks of radiotherapy beginning in August 1999, then returned to Elcho in October 1999.

Through persistence from my Specialist and from my GP on Elcho Island, Territory Health finally agreed to pay my airfares, but would only reimburse me \$450 for out of pocket expenses during my period of treatment in Adelaide April- October. It was necessary for me to catch public transport each day during radiotherapy treatment, and visits to specialists, as well as paying board while staying with friends. (I was also continuing to pay rent for my house on Elcho Island) I chose not to stay at Greenhill Lodge, as I needed support of friends to assist me with day to day issues especially

emotional support. Each year I return to Adelaide for a checkup with the specialist at my own cost.

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