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MEG'S STORY

A Collaborative Approach to Cancer Survivorship and Mental Health

My name is Meg Rynderman; I am 63 years old, a wife, mother of three children and a grandmother. Up until 'this story' began I worked full time in partnership with my husband John in our business and enjoyed good health.

What follows are the sign posts to my cancer survivorship…

- It is 1993; I am 43 years old and work full time. My oldest son is 19 and living in Israel for 12 months on a leadership program. My 17 year old son is doing his final year at high school and my 12 year old daughter is about to start high school.

- I am diagnosed with Nodular Sclerosing Hodgkins Disease – Stage 2A. I undertook 20 sessions of aggressive Mantle Radiotherapy and was referred from my GP to the care of a Haematologist & Radiation Oncologist.

"You're so lucky", said well-meaning friends conducting their own well intentioned enquiries, "Hodgkin's is the best cancer to have! No chemo – that's the worst!"

- Throughout 1994 and 1995 I am diagnosed with Radiation Pneumonitis for which I had multiple admissions, Radiation Pericarditis (my chest was cracked for a Cardiac Biopsy) and Radiation Fybromyalgia. My medical team expands to include an ENT Specialist, Cardiologist and Rheumatologist.

"You're so lucky", said the Specialist. "It's only radiation damage to your spinal cord, heart, trachea and lung – it could have been something altogether new and nasty!"

- We structured our business so I could work when I was able. John was holding down the fort both at work and at home. His mother, who didn't drive and lived on the other side of town, would often catch a taxi to our house to deliver her home cooked meals.

- We invested, for the first time, in an answering machine to field the volume of well intended calls from family and friends.

- Between 1995 and 2001 I enjoyed good health.

Mental Health Professionals' Network

Emirates House
Level 8
257 Collins Street
Melbourne
VIC 3000

postal
PO Box 203
Flinders Lane
VIC 8009

email
contactus@mhpn.org.au

telephone
1800 209 031

www.mhpn.org.au

Continued over page > >

- In 2001, when I was 51 years old, I was diagnosed with Recurrent Hodgkin Lymphoma and underwent six cycles of chemotherapy.

"You're so lucky", the Oncologist told me when I found a new lump a few years later, "chemo is indicated".
I was lucky – lucky to lose my hair, to spend days and nights with my head over the toilet, to lose taste and appetite!

- Two of my children were still living at home, my daughter and one son were at university and my eldest son was working in our family business.

- At around the same time my mother in law was diagnosed with and hospitalized for Alzheimer's. I remember visiting her before I would go for my treatment.

- In 2004 I was diagnosed with Recurrent Aggressive Hodgkin Lymphoma.

"You're not so lucky this time", the new Oncologist reported on the most recent recurrence. "It's more aggressive, and won't respond to chemo!"

- For the first time I started to feel like my illness was defining me. I gave up my job and didn't anticipate the impact this would have on me and my identity.

- I had but one treatment option, an Autologous Stem Cell Transplant. I transfer from my Medical Oncologist to a Clinical Haematologist/Bone Marrow Transplant Specialist.

"You're so lucky we can perform a Stem Cell Transplant".
And they did, and the days, weeks, months and specific details don't bear repeating here!

- A lengthy period of recuperation followed. I was in hospital for a month and my son and daughter would come and sit every day with me as the hospital was close to their Uni.

- The next six months of recovery were difficult. I returned to work but it wasn't really until 12 months after my transplant that I felt a 'new kind of normal'.

- In 2006 John went back to study and embarked on a whole new career.

- In 2009 I started to volunteer at the Cancer Council, and the following year at the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre (Peter Mac).

- By 2010 we had closed the family business. Two of my children had married and I had one grandchild. I was enjoying retirement with my voluntary work, learning how to play bridge and relishing being a grandparent. Life was good.

- John had gone on the Great Victorian Bike Ride and I was away with our daughter for the weekend. I found a lump under my arm which was diagnosed as hormone positive breast cancer.
- Given previous radiotherapy my treatment options were significantly limited. My treatment plan was to undertake a bilateral mastectomy and reconstruction followed by anti hormone therapy.
- My GP referred me to a Breast Surgeon; my team included a Medical Oncologist, Breast Care Nurse & Plastic Surgeon.
- I endure my third bout of chemically induced menopause, an unwelcome side effect of anti-hormone therapy.
- Slowly, I am reclaiming my life. The goal posts have shifted once more – I am changed physically and psychologically, and again I survive.

I might, I think, have chosen a gentler and somewhat less brutal journey for myself. But, regardless of the means, the end has found me enriched.

Meg Rynderman
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