

"Caring for the person with cancer- a positive nursing experience"

Alf Kretschmar Award Submission

It still gives me wet eyes and a lump in my throat when I remember one of the first meetings of the Childers Cancer Support Group. The daughter of one of the members, whose father was diagnosed as having a terminal brain tumour, said "This group will be great for Dad. We know he is going to die soon, but who will help us when he is gone?" In unison, around the room we all replied "We will".

I have been nursing for many years and palliative care has always been close to my heart. My interest came after I helped nurse my terminally ill father in law. I experienced firsthand the emotional and physical turmoil that cancer brings. I also realised what a privilege it is to be part of that time in a person's life. That was 26 years ago. Information, services and support were not readily available and we struggled with the day to day duties and emotions that caring for a loved one brings. His wish was to die at home amongst family and familiar surroundings. Our support came from a wonderful doctor and a devoted, loving family who did everything they could to uphold that decision.

I live and work in Childers, a small rural town in South East Queensland. Efforts to start a cancer support group in our local area had been tried in the past, without success. It wasn't until two eager medical students, on placement at the Medical Centre where I work, made it their project to start a Cancer Support Group. The word "cancer" is always laced with fear and while information is becoming increasingly available, it can often be difficult to find. The editor of our local paper wrote an article highlighting the students' vision. Our staff helped by making pamphlets, posters and informing patients and medical professionals within the district. These efforts were rewarded and finally they managed to chair the inaugural Childers Cancer Support Group on the 13th of May 2010. We had about fifteen people attend, never before knowing each other, but instantly forming a bond. Each person was asked to introduce themselves and invited to tell why they came. Some said a little, some said a lot. One just cried. Overall, they wanted information and support in an atmosphere they could trust. We were inundated with ideas and suggestions from the group and looked forward to the next time we met.

The medical students moved on, happy to have met a genuine need within the community but this left the group without a facilitator. That's where I come in. I am joined by another nurse, who shares my passion. Together, we try to meet the varied needs of the group. It is member driven and very much a work in progress. We meet monthly, very informally, and welcome family, friends and other interested members of the community to attend. We have had many guest speakers, which have included a Doctor, dietician, physiotherapist, psychologist and cancer support providers. Other medical students have also joined us and made useful contributions to the group.

Childers is approximately 400km from Brisbane, which is the major treatment centre for cancer patients in our area. These people have had their diagnosis and treatment plan outlined by their local doctor. They have had their worst fears realised. They have dealt with the shock and reactions of family and friends. But for some, it is the prospect of going to "the big smoke" for six or more weeks that is totally daunting. Thanks to one student who identified the difficulties faced by some members, we now have a Brisbane directory which outlines all the hospitals, accommodation and public transport options as well as maps, travel subsidy information and how to get a "Go Card". Another student wanted advice from the members as to what they expect from their doctors and nurses. It was interesting to hear the answers. We learned that while much of the information we take for granted might be everyday to us, it is not so for the patient. It is important that we should never assume anything. I personally, have become a better listener.

I think what surprised me the most was that what I had thought was important was not at all. As a nurse, I assumed it was the disease itself, the treatments and side effects. But, while these things need to be discussed and understood, it is also the everyday things. Who will feed the dog or water the plants when they are away for treatment were some of the basic concerns the members expressed. They are also keen to find out where the best cheap coffee and sandwiches are. It is not always about their illness. They want as much of "normal" as possible. Life goes on around them and they want a part of it. They don't want pity, just understanding. If we can't answer their questions within the group, we do our best to find out. I am constantly amazed by their honesty, openness and strength. We do not focus on one type of cancer. It is about providing information and support for all the members. I have a basket that I take to each meeting with all sorts of materials that has been given to the group. It has grown considerably and is utilized often. While I am the nurse, they teach me things I could never learn in my every day working life or in books. At times I feel my heart will break but it also swells with pride to be involved in this group.

Sometimes our numbers are few, other times the chairs are full but always we have people who are willing to share their knowledge and experiences. We have cancer survivors, who tell their stories and are a great source of information, support and hope. There is laughter, tears and sometimes anger, but above all there is trust, friendship and a common bond that brings us together. Before we all go our separate ways each month, we share a pot of tea, homemade cake baked by one of the members and farewell each other with firm handshakes, warm hugs and understanding smiles, until we meet again.