In October we were surrounded by the colour pink. Around the world, October is acknowledged as breast cancer awareness month. Iconic buildings are lit pink, people wear pink ribbon and pink lady pins, supermarket products are ‘pinked’, pink planes fly in the skies, resources are launched, research findings are announced, pink parties are held and our pink lady symbol appears in communities as Mini-Fields around Australia.

For someone like me, this is a remarkable phenomenon. In 1993, the year of my diagnosis, breast cancer was a concept for private discussion only and were words spoken only in whispers. Women affected often only told the news of their diagnosis to those closest to them.

When I was diagnosed, I was contacted by a handful of women offering their quiet support and help. I was stunned to learn they had themselves experienced breast cancer. Some had even had bi-lateral mastectomies and although I felt I knew some of them quite well — they were friends — I had no idea they’d had breast cancer.

Thankfully, we have since improved the way the community views breast cancer. Strong women prepared to publicly share their experiences have given a personal face to the disease and opened up public discussion.

Women have banded together to raise issues, lobby politicians, fight for better services, establish support groups. Fewer women with breast cancer see themselves as victims. In fact, in this issue of The Beacon, women explore what it means to live well after a breast cancer diagnosis.

Earlier this year I was fortunate to meet P!NK, the pop sensation. She was interested to hear about the strong women who make up BCNA and who have helped make things better for the women who will come after us. I took along a cushion from my office sporting the words 'Pink – Not just a colour; It’s an attitude!' She LOVED it, and so do I. Every day it reminds me of the fabulous women I have met and continue to meet, many of whom face enormous challenges in their lives, and who have helped a community to face breast cancer head on, rather than in a whisper.

And speaking of pink ... this issue of The Beacon includes a bookmark listing the focus of each of our three national breast cancer organisations. Many people are very confused about which pink group does what — we hope this helps clarify the role of each organisation and the fact that we all have important work to do.

I wish all our readers a happy and safe Christmas and holiday period and a healthy year to follow.

Lyn Swinburne
Chief Executive Officer

SAVE THE DATE – Field of Women LIVE Melbourne – 7 May 2010
See page 15 for more details.
Pink ladies are on the map

Once again we have been thrilled by the efforts of the dynamic network of BCNA Member Groups, members and health professionals who held more than 200 Mini-Fields of Women during October.

The Mini-Field has become a regular feature on many local calendars and we are delighted that our BCNA women are at the forefront of organising these events – some for the very first time.

‘The community really embraced it and they were really moved and grateful.’

– Vivienne, VIC

Women and families affected by breast cancer were well supported and many new friendships were established.

‘It was a wonderful day. I met amazing people, had a lot of fun, collected donations, displayed many messages of hope and most importantly spread the word on breast cancer awareness.’

– Grace, QLD

What a range of events we had this year, with organising groups making sure they highlighted the best of their local settings. This led to a great diversity with events being held on beaches, in parks, local gardens, hospitals, chapels, service clubs, schools and restaurants.

These events had a powerful impact on the people attending and helped to lift the spirits of local communities.

‘It was a great day with lots of laughs and memories – how it should be.’

– Jo, NSW

We thank all BCNA Community Liaisons and members who willingly shared their personal breast cancer stories.

As always we thank Australia Post for its support as the Event Sponsor. We also thank the Bakers Delight bakeries that continue to generously provide delicious morning and afternoon teas.

To see the range of wonderful activities and communities involved in 2009 visit our website www.bcna.org.au > Events > Mini-Fields of Women 2009
Judith (left) coordinated the Port Macquarie and Hastings Mini-Field, NSW.

Sam combined her Mini-Field with the national meeting of the BCAUS online forum at Carclew Youth Arts Centre, Adelaide, South Australia.

Lyn and residents of the Salford Living Unity Village, Aberfoyle Park, SA, held a Mini-Field.

Judith (left) coordinated the Port Macquarie and Hastings Mini-Field, NSW.

The Kalbarri, WA, Mini-Field catered for all ages.

Pink ladies line up at Calvary Hospital for the annual Mini-Field of Women in the ACT.

Kerrie held a Mini-Field by the Balonne River, St George, Queensland, with the St George River Dragons Group.
Dr Sandi Hayes is a Senior Research Fellow with the Queensland University of Technology’s School of Public Health. Her research priorities include the role of exercise in breast cancer recovery and lymphoedema. The Beacon asked Sandi to explain the importance of exercise for women with breast cancer.

What is the role of exercise in general wellbeing?

Regular exercise during and following breast cancer treatment provides a range of benefits, for both physical and emotional wellbeing.

We know that women who are active tend to have better body image and higher self-esteem. Exercise is something women can control. It can help you to feel ‘normal’, and it can reduce anxiety, stress and depression.

Our studies have shown that regular exercise can help women manage the side-effects of breast cancer treatment, reducing nausea, fatigue and pain.

It can also help reduce the risk of developing other health problems, including cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, and diabetes.

When can women start exercising?

Women can start exercising at any age and at any time during their treatment – the earlier the better.

I say to women, ‘start slowly and progress slowly.’ We know that the Australian guidelines recommend 30 minutes of exercise five times per week for adults. This is no different for women with breast cancer. Our studies have shown that even women in the active stages of treatment can reach this goal safely. However, start slowly – think of what amount of exercise would make you really tired and then halve it – this can be your starting point.

How much is enough?

Our studies show that some exercise is better than none, and more is better than less. A word of caution though – if you think your exercise is making your symptoms worse, you need to reduce your activity levels and also consult your doctor.

What types of exercise are suitable?

It doesn’t matter what activities you do, as long as you are active. I recommend that you find something you enjoy doing, because if you don’t enjoy it, you won’t do it.

Many activities women do as part of their normal daily routine can also be used to increase activity levels. Gardening instead of watching TV, sweeping and vacuuming, and walking up stairs instead of using the lift are easy ways to increase your daily activity.

We know that many women do not enjoy exercise. How can they stay motivated?

The key is to include some exercise in your plan for the day. Planning is vital – if it is in the daily plan you are more likely to do it, just like the other things we don’t enjoy so much – like going to the dentist!

You can maximise ways to make yourself stick to your plan. You might, for example, arrange to walk with a friend, so you feel less inclined to change your mind when the time comes.

Is exercise okay for women with lymphoedema?

The preliminary evidence we have on this issue is that exercise is safe for women with lymphoedema, meaning that exercise does not exacerbate lymphoedema if it exists and that exercise does not make women more susceptible to developing it. There is also some evidence to suggest that exercise may even help prevent it.

Has your research shown real benefits for women who live an active and healthy lifestyle?

Our research has shown that women who stay regularly active during and after their treatment are usually well equipped to perform their daily activities without undue physical and emotional stress.

Participants involved with our work have also reinforced the importance of being active from a personal view: ‘Exercise is the one thing in my life that I control and it makes the other things in my life that seem to be controlled by others easier to deal with.’ Another woman wrote to us after she’d finished participating in one of our studies saying ‘A small note of enormous thanks and privilege to have been part of your wonderful research. The benefits it [exercise intervention] has brought to me have been so exciting, long lasting and highly effective. I hope many more of my sisters can benefit.’ So, while for some the benefits of regular exercise may be subtle, for others the benefits are life changing.
‘After the roller-coaster of diagnosis and treatment … everyone forgets, and they expect you to be able to do all the things you were doing before. You don’t want to be thought of as being ‘precious’, but you don’t feel the same anymore – physically or emotionally.’

BCNA member

The completion of treatment such as surgery, chemotherapy and/or radiotherapy often marks a new time in a woman’s breast cancer journey.

The issues that emerge can be quite different to those that were experienced earlier on and may include dealing with physical side effects, maintaining emotional wellbeing, practical and financial challenges, and relationship and lifestyle changes. These are often referred to as ‘survivorship’ issues.

In recent years, research into ‘survivorship’ issues has been growing, partly in response to the more than 113,000 women believed to be living with the effects of the disease and its treatment in Australia.

BCNA believes it is vital that research into survivorship issues is driven by women, so that we can ensure that the issues that are important to us are identified and addressed.

So, BCNA commissioned researchers from Monash University to find out what our members think are the most important survivorship issues. We received more than 800 completed surveys.

‘As a young woman with three young children, my main issue is if or when the cancer will return and things that can be done to prevent recurrence.’

More than 80% of women identified the risk of cancer recurring as the most important issue for further research. The impact of treatment on long-term physical health was also high on the list for most women.

Other important physical health issues requiring further research included lymphoedema, bone health, breast reconstruction, fatigue, pain, early menopause and ‘chemo-brain’.

‘The emotional fallout feels harder to deal with than the treatments at times – what to do with life, [how to] manage fear … recovery is hard work. My experience is the body is healed …, but my emotions, mental health and wellbeing are taking longer to recover.’

Emotional issues also featured strongly in survey responses. In particular, women identified the fear of recurrence as a major priority for research. Women felt that the lack of information about the possibility of cancer returning often caused stress and anxiety, and some women told us that they find it hard not to worry about this.

Depression, anxiety and stress were all highlighted as important issues requiring further research.

‘I thought left breast off, chemo, radium, Tamoxifen, right breast off. Get my life back. I am pissed off that I am not as fit/well as before breast cancer.’

Many women told us they just didn’t feel the same as before a diagnosis of breast cancer. There was an expectation from themselves and from those around them that life would ‘get back to normal’ once treatment was over. Some women were frustrated and upset that this was not the case.

Some were angry that they weren’t told they may experience ongoing physical and emotional side effects well after treatment was over. Other women said they became depressed when they realised life may never be the same as before.

‘My fears and feelings are often dismissed and I get the feeling that I’m one of hundreds of women that [my specialist] sees. I don’t feel like I am treated with importance.’

Women talked about difficulties they had discussing emotional health issues with their doctor. They felt their doctor was concerned only with their ‘breast health’ and not their overall wellbeing, and that their fears were often dismissed or discounted.

Our survey has highlighted a wide range of survivorship issues that women feel are key priority areas requiring further research. BCNA will share these findings with researchers, and work with them, to ensure that future research addresses the issues that are important in improving the lives of women with breast cancer around the country.

To see the full report of the Research Priorities Survey, visit our website at www.bcna.org.au > Policy & advocacy > Research reports and surveys > BCNA research and survey reports.
Vitamin D and breast cancer

One of the side effects of treatment for breast cancer can be a loss of bone density. This may be due to the onset of menopause and the subsequent reduction in the level of oestrogen in your system. Aromatase inhibitors used as anti-hormonal therapy can also reduce levels of oestrogen and can lead to a loss of bone density.

Some oncologists and health professionals encourage women with breast cancer to increase their levels of Vitamin D to help manage this side effect. Vitamin D helps our bodies absorb calcium and therefore may help to reduce bone density loss. Measuring your Vitamin D level, through a blood test, may be worthwhile to check if you are deficient or not.

The issue for many of us is, of course, how to get the Vitamin D our bodies need.

Some women take Vitamin D supplements, which can be bought from a supermarket or chemist, and do not need a script. Some supplements contain Vitamin D and calcium but may have relatively low amounts of Vitamin D per tablet. It is worth checking how much Vitamin D is in each tablet and discussing with your doctor if this is the appropriate amount.

Direct exposure to sunlight is a key source of Vitamin D, but for years we have been told to ‘slip, slop, slap’ before going out into the sun.

The National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre suggests spending between five and 15 minutes in the sun, four to six times per week. If possible, expose your hands, face and arms. However, it is important not to do this during the hottest part of the day between 10am and 3pm.

Vitamin D is also found in small quantities in foods such as fatty fish (salmon, herring, and mackerel), liver, eggs and Vitamin D fortified foods. However, if you are deficient it is unlikely that you will get enough Vitamin D through diet alone.

If you have not had a Vitamin D test or are unsure whether you need to increase your Vitamin D levels, you may like to raise this with your oncologist or GP at your next appointment. Bone health is important!

The role of Vitamin D in the development of cancers, including breast cancer, has become an important topic in recent years. There have been some studies suggesting that women with low levels of Vitamin D may be at higher risk of developing breast cancer, but this remains a research question and is not yet proven. We also don’t fully understand what influence Vitamin D levels after breast cancer may have on longer term outcomes. There is a lot of research happening in this area and we will keep you updated on important results as they come along.

Exercise and you

Increasingly we are hearing more and more about the value of exercise for both body and mind. We wanted to know what kinds of exercise you do and how you feel about it, so we went to our Review & Survey Group members to ask. This is what some of them told us.

‘I notice that a walk really makes me feel better in the week after my chemotherapy. I was surprised at how it not only lifted my mood … but I physically felt better and lighter in spirit.’

‘I absolutely hated the thought of doing a weight-bearing gym class, but the benefits from just one hour a week are fabulous. I am stronger in my arms, especially the affected side.’

The most popular activities among the respondents were walking, gym, gardening, pilates, golf and the YWCA’s Encore program.

To read more about the survey results go to www.bcna.org.au > Policy & advocacy > Research reports and surveys > BCNA research and survey reports, or phone us on 1800 500 258 (freecall) and we’ll send you a copy.

To find out more about our Review & Survey Group, or to join, visit www.bcna.org.au > Policy & advocacy > Seat at the Table > Get involved.

Survivorship

Many women told us they do not like the terms ‘breast cancer survivor’ or ‘survivorship’. This is a view shared by women around the world. We know that Breast Cancer Care, UK undertook research with their women to find another term, but came up blank. While phrases such as ‘living well after breast cancer’ are preferred by some women, there is generally no acceptable alternative term. Some of the suggestions from our survey include breast cancer ‘veteran’, ‘beater’, or ‘traveller’, ‘Wonder Women’, and ‘women who have experienced breast cancer’.

Until we can find a term agreeable to most people, we will continue to use the term ‘survivor’.
**Bone health**

Many women who completed our recent survivorship survey (see page 5) told us that bone health is an issue of concern. While it is widely known that bone density in women can drop after menopause, there are also some types of breast cancer treatments that can reduce bone density. These include the hormonal therapy drugs called aromatase inhibitors.

Some women who have reached menopause and who have particular types of breast cancer may be encouraged by their doctor to take an aromatase inhibitor, such as Arimidex, Femara or Aromasin, for five years after their breast cancer treatment.

One of the side effects of these drugs can be reduced bone density, which for some women who might already be at risk can lead to osteoporosis and bone fractures in some circumstances.

If you are prescribed an aromatase inhibitor and are considered to be at increased risk of osteoporosis, your doctor may refer you for a bone density test. You may then have your bone density tested every one or two years to monitor your levels.

Your doctor may also prescribe a bisphosphonate drug, such as Fosamax, to help strengthen your bones.

Loss of bone density can also be an issue for younger women who experience premature menopause due to chemotherapy. Some simple ways to improve bone health include eating a healthy diet, increasing calcium and Vitamin D levels, and exercising regularly.

Exercise helps to maintain bone mass and increases muscle strength, reducing the risk of falls which can result in fractures. Physical activities recommended for bone health include weight-bearing exercise such as brisk walking, and strength training using light weights.

If you are not sure about your bone health or what you can do about it, you may like to talk to your GP or oncologist.

More information on bone health is available at www.bcna.org.au > Information > Resources or phone 1800 500 258 (freecall) and we will send a copy to you.

**Bone density testing**

There are several tests for measuring bone density. The most common and accurate is the DEXA test. This measures bone density at the hip and spine, using low-dose radiation.

Bone density tests are different from the bone scans that many women have at the time of their diagnosis. Bone scans are used to see if the breast cancer has spread to other parts of the body; bone density testing measures the strength of bone.

Charges for DEXA X-rays usually range from $90 to $150. A Medicare rebate is available for anyone aged over 70 and for some people who have had a previous bone fracture.

Bone density testing as part of breast cancer surveillance and treatment. If you are referred for a DEXA test, you may like to ask your doctor if you are eligible for a rebate under the Medicare guidelines.

BCNA is monitoring the costs of bone density testing for women. If you would like to let us know about your experience, please email policy@bcna.org.au.
Staying in office

One year after being diagnosed with breast cancer, I can honestly say I have never felt better. Life is wonderful. I have boundless energy, I laugh a lot and I love life.

That ‘suspicious lump’ from a routine mammogram came four days after I was elected Mayor of Lismore on the North Coast of NSW. Three weeks later I underwent a mastectomy, lymph node clearance and then chemotherapy. Fortunately, I did not require radiotherapy as it would have required travel to the Gold Coast for seven weeks of daily treatment.

I had worked hard to become Mayor and cancer was not going to take that away from me. Although I missed a council workshop while I was in hospital, I did not miss one formal meeting and maintained all my community engagements. The day after I came home from hospital I attended the local Pink Ribbon Breakfast. The following week I had my official photos taken with my drainage tubes discretely hidden underneath my mayoral robes or my jacket. Yes it was tiring, and sometimes I felt very ill, but my mind was occupied and I was doing something I loved.

My family has continued to be wonderfully supportive and while the past year has had some difficulties, they know I am now thriving and have found my vocation – albeit not until my late 50s!

As I write this, I am celebrating one year as Mayor and the achievement of overcoming the breast cancer speed bump in the road. I now have curly hair, much to my mother’s delight, for the first time in my life.

Living well for me is doing something I am passionate about. Being Mayor of this fantastic community is the best job in the world and I am very pleased to use my profile to raise awareness of breast cancer.

Jenny, NSW

Getting back to the gym

I considered myself a fairly healthy person. I went to the gym five or six times a week (having been doing so for about 25 years), walked and ran. I had a healthy diet, only sometimes had junk food, had an occasional drink and didn’t smoke.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in August 2008 and my family and friends were quite shocked as they thought I was such a fit person – but, as we know, breast cancer does not discriminate.

After struggling to come to terms with the diagnosis I realised that being fit and healthy helped me through my surgery; chemo and radiation. I took up yoga, pilates and tai chi during my chemo and also participated in the YWCA Encore Program where we did light floor exercise and water aerobics specifically designed for breast cancer survivors.

In November 2008 (during chemo and then radiation), I rejoined my gym and went every day doing very light weights. I am now back into the full swing of my gym regime, doing yoga, running again on the treadmill and of course still eating healthy (incorporating homemade juices) although nowadays I don’t say no to a choccy or a champers!

I still believe being healthy is the best lifestyle but I am not so strict on myself anymore. My husband and I are in the process of rethinking our lifestyle and may move closer to my family in Queensland and have a more laid back life!

Chris, Victoria
The power of love

Living well presents me with challenges both physically and emotionally. Living well for me is a priority which also requires me to live differently.

In 2006 I was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent surgery twice. Within months I received confirmation that my husband Len was suffering with dementia and I became his carer.

Here we are three years on, and my journey continues positively. My Len is not as fortunate, as his cruel illness only goes in one direction. He is now assessed as high care, but is still at home with me.

Our journey has taught me much about myself, my strengths and weaknesses. I’ve experienced the innate goodness of many people and the seeming lack of compassion in others. I don’t have time to unduly worry about breast cancer; I try to live well for Len’s sake as well as my own. The time for him to go into care looms large. I cannot imagine that day.

As we journey towards our golden wedding anniversary I’m grateful the love of my life is still with me. We have the unconditional support of our daughter and son, their partners and young adult grandchildren.

My sister and Len’s sister are there for us. My friend of 59 years, Judith, is always a soft place to fall. Other good friends pick me up when I stumble and we both have caring doctors who help us to live well.

My motivation to carry on is love.

Dora, Queensland

A positive experience

I was never going to get cancer. I didn’t smoke or drink and, anyway, I was 76 and didn’t realise I was still at risk. But life is full of challenges to be met and faced, whatever they are.

I had read Ian Gawler’s book You Can Conquer Cancer more than 20 years ago and knew if I ever got cancer his method was the one for me. My family all felt happier when they knew what I had decided to do. I started as soon as I came out of hospital.

1. Diet: mostly grains, vegetables and fruit. No white flour, no sugar, little or no meat, little or no dairy – and always organic if possible.
2. Meditation: I found this really hard to learn but well worth persevering with. I think it has taught me to be calmer.
3. Exercise: Never a favourite of mine, I now walk for 30 minutes every day. Bon bon, our mini foxy, thinks this is an excellent idea.
4. Positive attitude: For me this means doing something – which is not the same as wishful thinking!

So, how do I feel now? Really well. I enjoy my life to a much greater extent than before I had cancer. This may sound surprising – but it’s true! Cancer for me has turned into a positive experience.

Angela, NSW
Yoga and wellbeing

There is a song that laments ‘They paved paradise and put up a parking lot’. Like many people I have spoken to, once diagnosed I became more acutely aware of the paradise of life. I began to explore how to develop an attitude of acceptance and surrender – not giving up and wasting valuable energy ‘fighting’, but powerfully working to build wellness – mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically.

Meditation was a key tool for me at this time. From there all paths led to yoga, and following teacher training, further studies in its application therapeutically. Through studying the philosophy and psychology of yoga I learnt how I was putting up ‘parking lots’ – that it was my mind reacting to difficult situations that created stress, and how I ruminated on the past or ran into a minefield of negative thoughts about the future. In doing this I was missing what was happening now. Finally I had found something that really made sense to me, and that I could practise, working with my mind and my body together.

Given what I had learned, I wanted to share this and so during my studies I undertook research into the benefit of yoga therapy as an intervention to improve subjective quality of life for women treated for breast cancer. Twelve participants undertook an eight-week program that included ‘mindful’ movement; breath work, relaxation and group discussions about lifestyle based on yogic principles. Yes, yoga is far more than those postures you see in magazines, and it has become my compass in life.

The main findings of the study suggested that the yoga program improved participants’ ability to relax and handle stress. They also reported improvements in overall quality of life, including improved appetite, sleep and perception of future security, as well as decreased fatigue and pain. Many participants commented on the benefits of the sense of community and social connectedness they felt with others in the yoga sessions. Following completion of the project in May 2008 I have continued to work with small groups of people who have experienced cancer. Sharing the fabulous and empowering tool for wellness that yoga practice provides, is for me, both a privilege and a passion.

Susan, Victoria

Living in the moment

After being diagnosed with breast cancer in July 2008 at the age of 38 I embarked on a journey of surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, Chinese herbs, homeopathy, meditation, affirmation, visualisation, energy reconnection, prayer, organic lotions and potions, supplements, tai chi, Latin American dance classes, cooking classes, juices, the introduction of new foods, the elimination of some foods, and laughter therapy, and I chose to surround myself with positive and helpful people. I haven’t continued to do all of those things, but I love trying new things now and it is great for the soul.

I have learnt the importance of allowing myself to truly feel all the emotions my body experiences instead of trying to be strong all the time and push them away. I am true to myself and recognise and embrace my own needs more. This helps me to live well on an emotional, physical and spiritual level.

I never felt pressure to change my lifestyle, but I happily took up the challenge and embraced the opportunity to create change and enhance my wellbeing.

What does it mean to be the new me, living well? I am still finding that out.

I cry when I’m happy, when I’m sad and unexpectedly. The worry, fear and loneliness monster still visits me occasionally. I am more sensitive to smells, I have curly hair, my boys tell me I eat too much healthy stuff, I don’t use as many toxic chemicals, I try hard to balance self-care and other commitments, I go to cancer support groups, I have given up smoking, I exercise daily, I feel the beauty of nature. I thought I had a great passion for life before, but now it is even greater. I experience life differently. I try to live up to my motto of “glorious living”. I live in the moment, enjoy what I do and do what I enjoy. Most of all I love and truly appreciate being surrounded by friends, family and children, who always show me the magic and wonders of the world.

Lynnese, Tasmania
Walking to health

I was first diagnosed with breast cancer in November 2005 with treatment involving a drawn out decision to have chemotherapy and radiation treatment interstate. After radiation in Melbourne, I returned to Darwin and threw myself into full-time work and a normal life, as though the whole cancer experience was a bad dream and something to forget.

In August 2007 I took a break from work to complete the Camino de Frances, an 800 kilometre walk and pilgrimage from St Jean Pied de Port in southern France to Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain. Was it a mistake coming half way round the world and believing I could walk 800 kilometres? It was to be one of the best and most memorable experiences of my life.

On the first day across the Pyrenees, I seemed to stop every 20 metres to catch my breath. With no experience of climbing mountains available in Darwin and despite my poor rating, I was undeterred in believing that I would reach Santiago. I walked myself into a level of fitness that saw me conquer the mountains of Galicia. My lungs expanded. I lost four kilograms in weight. My persistence was paying off.

Walking the Camino brought life back to basics, with one change of clothes, basic accommodation and pilgrims’ meals – living in the moment.

In October 2007 a routine check revealed another primary tumour. My initial treatment had failed. I had walked the Camino with breast cancer.

Following radical surgery and more chemotherapy, I am fit and well again and looking forward to the future. The Camino de Portugese from Oporto to Santiago, only 433 kilometres this time, will be the next challenge. That will be in 2010, three years on from the first Camino, but this time walking without cancer.

Robyn, NT

De-cluttering life

Facing two breast cancer diagnoses in two years, I realised that living well was the only way to live.

Following my 40th birthday and a mastectomy in 2006, I was diagnosed in 2008 with more cancer in the thin skin around my implant reconstruction. Recovering from a total of six surgeries and six weeks of radiotherapy gave me a lot of time to ponder my lifestyle. The second diagnosis coincided with an increase in work from two days a week to full-time. The increased workload, along with the demands of two children and all their activities, a husband and cleaning a large home was proving exhausting!

Within six months of my latest diagnosis, my family downsized to a much smaller house set in peaceful, nurturing parkland. Think ‘Taj Mahal’ versus ‘Little House on the Prairie’.

Filling two skips with decades of possessions that had been packed away was very liberating. In de-cluttering the old house, I also de-cluttered my life.

Now, each morning I greet the majestic trees in my backyard. I feel the trees nurture my soul.

We would have bought the house even if it was a tin shed, just so I could enjoy such a beautiful setting. I no longer have a lot of housework to stress over. Instead, in downsizing our home, I have gained the time to ‘live well’.

Each afternoon I treat myself to a cappuccino on the way home from work. As I work in a school, I’m home before my children and treasure that part of the day.

These days I walk around my lovely home grinning because I am so happy here and feel that I am living well every single second.

Maria, NSW
Lopsided
By Meredith Norton
Hachette Australia 2008
(paperback) 213 pages
RRP: $35.00

Lopsided is billed as ‘one ordinary woman’s journey through breast cancer and out the other side’. Meredith Norton, 34, has a young son and is living in Paris when one of her breasts becomes swollen and painful. Four French doctors fail to diagnose inflammatory breast cancer, but within days of returning to the USA for a quick trip to visit her family, a battery of tests is performed and the diagnosis is made.

This book follows the next 20 months of Meredith’s life, as she attempts to become ‘one of the 40%’ (who survive this type of cancer) and ‘not one of the 60%’. Meredith’s husband, Thibault, moves to the US to be with her and the family (including Lucas, aged 11 months at the time of diagnosis) and they moved into a one-roomed cottage for the duration of the treatment. The reader shares much of Meredith’s journey, and follows her through the baldness of chemotherapy, via surgery and prosthetics, to the tedium of radiation treatment, then a bit more chemotherapy, and out the other side.

Despite the graveness of much of the material, this book is laugh-out-loud funny at times, as Meredith seems to manage to see the ridiculousness and humour in her predicament. There are many amusing moments. I could relate to Meredith’s ‘chemo-brain’ that left her ‘with the cognitive and analytical skills of a small rodent … stupider than ever’. And I laughed as she described her mounting hysteria as she had to repeatedly break the news of her cancer to friends, the seriousness of the situation becoming lost in the frequent retellings, until she found herself ‘openly laughing at the excessive drama of the situation’.

Healthy Eating during Chemotherapy
by José van Mil with
Christine Archer-Mackenzie.
Kyle Cathie Limited, London.
2008. Paperback, 176 pages,
US$16.95 (Amazon)

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer my family and I were caring for our mother who was terminally ill with multiple brain tumours. I was unable to nurse Mum as much as I wanted but tried to offer as much support to Dad and my sisters as I could. Half way through my chemo our mother passed away.

I wish we had this cookbook when Mum and I were going through our chemotherapies. It’s not too daunting in length, and the information pages at the front briefly explain cancer treatments and some of the side effects you may be suffering.

The good foods list is a simple list of foods which are highly recommended, for occasional use and those which should be avoided during chemotherapy.

The author, an experienced chef who has nursed her husband throughout his cancer treatments, has selected foods packed with nutrients. If you can’t eat much, make it count! She has divided the recipes not by type of meal as is usual in cookbooks but by texture. Each recipe is marked at the top with serving temperature, flavour (e.g. cool and sweet or warm and savoury) and then the strength of flavours. This should make it easier for you to select dishes which will be tolerable.

Most of the recipes require only six or seven ingredients and, although this is an English book, all of them should be readily available here. The photos of the finished dishes and snacks are colourful and appealing. If your finished meals look half as good they should be tempting to anyone who is struggling with tainted taste buds, sore mouths and wobbly tummy.

I enjoyed this book, and I imagine it could be a helpful resource for other young women with breast cancer, particularly for those with inflammatory breast cancer (which seems to be underrepresented in the literature). I appreciated Meredith’s quirky and wry view of her situation, although I have to admit that I felt relieved when her sense of humour failed, and she found herself crying at a celebration barbecue, and slamming trolleys in the supermarket. For me, these events made her telling of her experience gritty and real, and I am sure that many women will appreciate Meredith’s honesty in telling her story.

Alex Cole
BCNA Review & Survey Group Member
Profiling our Member Groups

Amazons Perth Dragon Boat Club

In this issue about living well beyond breast cancer we profile one of our WA Member Groups, Amazons Perth Dragon Boat Club.

Amazons’ members range in age from early 40s to early 70s and come from a wide variety of backgrounds including doctors, librarians, tax consultants and courier drivers, just to name a few. They meet twice weekly to train at the Maylands Sport and Recreational Club.

Founded in 2000 as part of Dragons Abreast Australia, the Amazons passionately promote the benefits of dragon boating, with their motto ‘Through Hell and High Water’.

‘We feel this describes our various journeys, for we all have been touched by breast cancer in some way,’ says Amazons member Jennie Ellis. ‘We wanted more than survival, we wanted quality of life. Paddling dragon boats gives this to us!’

Jennie says the name Amazon comes from Greek mythology and has great significance for the group’s members.

‘The Amazon warrior women had a breast removed to allow greater accuracy when shooting arrows,’ she says. ‘They were protective and loyal to each other and even when wounded would continue to battle on.

‘That’s how our team operates. We care for each other and show that there is life after a breast cancer diagnosis. We find the active, vigorous exercise of paddling enhances physical and emotional wellbeing within the context of caring companionship.’

With a name like Amazons it is not surprising that the group’s members are no strangers to a bit of healthy competition.

‘It’s a terrific feeling to be in the boat doing your best as an individual, yet moving forward as part of a team … sometimes even winning races,’ Jennie says.

But it isn’t all about the big events. ‘We are serious about our paddling, but we are really serious about having fun.’ After the first regatta of each season the Amazons head to Fairbridge Farm for a fun ‘sleep-over’.

If fun, companionship and water-based exercise with like-minded women sounds good to you, the Amazons encourage you to look up your local dragon boat club and have a go.

To find out more about the Amazons Perth Dragon Boat Club and the physical benefits of paddling visit their website www.amazonsperth.com.au or email Jennie at jerb@westnet.com.au.

Further information about Dragons Abreast clubs in other parts of Australia can be found at www.dragonsabreast.com.au.

www.bcna.org.au
Thank you

We appreciate the financial support given to us by individuals, clubs, organisations and companies around Australia. We would especially like to acknowledge the help of the following recent outstanding supporters:

- Blackmores Sydney Running Festival participants and donors
- BreastScreen Queensland and Jurina Demaine, QLD
- Canterbury Girls Secondary College, VIC
- Dave Taylor, NSW
- Debbie Murray and Sandra Parker, VIC
- Defence National Storage and Distribution Centre, NSW
- East Gippsland Umpires Association, VIC
- Gillian Franklin, VIC
- Jenny Sparks, VIC
- Jill Robinson, QLD
- Jo-Anne Feirclough, QLD
- John Shard, QLD
- Lynn Brewster, VIC
- Make Breast Cancer History – Rachel West and Wendy Hamson, VIC
- Manildra Group
- Maria Kirk, VIC
- Melbourne Football Club
- Myer Pty Ltd
- Northern Territory Fire and Rescue Service, NT
- Sarah Fest, SA
- Peter Anderson, VIC
- Peter Collins, VIC
- Spearwood Dalmatinac Club – Elaine Flannery, WA
- St Peter’s Junior Football Club, East Bentleigh, VIC
- Surfers for McCanns, NSW
- Susan Oakley and Suzanne Lee, SA
- Sussan Group
- Sydney 3 Day Event, NSW
- Tesselaar Tulip Farm, VIC
- The Eirene Lucas Foundation, VIC
- The National Council of Jewish Women of Australia Foundation, VIC
- The Pink Lady Art Show – Lisa Sowards, VIC
- The Vintage Golf Club, NSW
- Trish Mahony, TAS
- Victoria Hotel, Wagga Wagga, NSW
- Warehouse Fitness Centre, South Fremantle, WA
- Woollahra Golf Club, NSW
- Yarra Yarra Golf Club, VIC

Memorials

We pay tribute to the lives of:
- Esther Treller
- Gina Beauchamp
- Judy Mackay
- Mary Coombe
- Merle Margaret Mikkelsen
- Susan McKeown
- Teresa Girgenti

We are grateful for the donations we have received in their memory, and also for the generous bequest from the Estate of Merle Margaret Mikkelsen.

Celebrations

Thank you to those who celebrated a special occasion and asked for donations to BCNA in lieu of gifts.

Happy birthday to
- Bronwyn Chan
- David Ackroyd
- Denise and Kris Newton
- Marini Moses
- Shannyn Hermann

Congratulations to Joyce and Doug Forward on their recent marriage.
Be there on the MCG!

We are thrilled to announce that we will be presenting our third Field of Women LIVE next year. Please mark the date in your diary:

Friday 7 May 2010, evening – MCG, Melbourne

The very moving events held in Melbourne in 2005 and Sydney in 2007 were both sold out ahead of time. Register your interest now to be one of the first in line to secure a spot on the Field. Visit www.fieldofwomenlive.org.au

Berlei Bus comes to Sydney

Wynyard Park, Sydney, turned into a sea of pink and red to launch Breast Cancer Awareness month. The Berlei Fitting Bus rolled into town and joined forces with the Pink Ladies to spread the word about BCNA. Raelene Boyle joined in the fun talking about the work of BCNA to the more than 280 women while they waited for a bra fitting by Berlei’s expert team.

Berlei generously donated $5 to BCNA from each bra sold on the day, and continued to donate $5 from the sale of each bra from their Berlei Pink Bra Collection during the month of October.

Berlei Bus comes to Sydney

Aerial shot of Field of Women LIVE 2007, Telstra Stadium, Sydney.

Berlei Community Liaisons Catherine McGrath, Jenny Wantoch-Smith, Carol Walker, Robyn Williams and Shirley Doust speaking to women waiting for their fitting.

BCNA gratefully acknowledges our partnership with Bakers Delight.

BCNA gratefully acknowledges our partnership with Bakers Delight.
Pink Lady around the World

Our Pink Lady has travelled the world. We love receiving photos of her recent travels. Please email any photos you may have of her to beacon@bcna.org.au

Your stories

Rural women and breast cancer

We are seeking stories for the Autumn 2010 issue of The Beacon about rural women and the challenges of dealing with breast cancer.

We want to hear from readers who live away from major cities. What were your experiences, the good and the bad, of diagnosis and treatment?

Please email articles of 200-300 words (about half a page) to beacon@bcna.org.au by the end of March 2010.

Please also include a high-resolution digital photo, or post your photo to us, and we will return it to you.

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