

The Connecting and Supporting Rural and Regional Women with Cancer project

What was the project?

The aim of the *Connecting and Supporting Rural and Regional Women with Cancer* project was to improve understanding of the support and information needs of women affected by cancer in rural and regional Victoria. The key objectives were to:

- i) Understand the diverse experiences and needs of women living with cancer in the Barwon South West and Grampians region, particularly people facing greater barriers accessing information and support: aged, low income and culturally and linguistically diverse;
- ii) Develop an understanding of existing support services and needs of service providers caring for women living with cancer;
- iii) Develop a sustainable and transferable model of information and support for women living with cancer in rural and regional Victoria; and
- iv) Provide recommendations that improve access to information and support for women living with cancer in rural and regional Victoria.

Who ran the project?

BreaCan, in partnership with the Integrated Cancer Services of Barwon South West and Grampians, was asked in 2014 by the Department of Health & Human Services to conduct this project.

What happened?

To gain insights into the perspectives and experiences of women with cancer, many discussions were held with women with cancer, their family and friends and service providers. We used individual interviews, focus groups and online surveys to collect data. We also looked at available reports to get the latest evidence and information on the support and information needs of women with cancer.

What did we find?

The key themes to come from the consumer and service provider meetings and surveys included:

- The importance of connecting with people who shared a similar experience;
- The significant role performed by local general practices;
- There currently isn't one easy way to find out about all relevant cancer information and cancer support options;
- People preferred to receive information somewhere where questions can be asked and answered; and
- The range and quality of information and support required by women with cancer is not the same for different cancers.
- Service providers would like to know more about some non-clinical issues related to cancer.

The key themes to come from reports and research papers:

- Rural and regional people face a number of barriers to finding and using cancer information and support
 - The need for support is different for rural and regional people with a cancer diagnosis depending on what they expect and how they like find more information

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- Not knowing about existing services and a lack of coordination can make it hard to find services in country areas
- A range of practical support is required by rural and regional women (including transport, accommodation, financial, childcare and home help)
- There are many benefits associated with peer support (talking to other women with cancer)
- Creative approaches to technology can increase the availability of information and support
- Complicated medical language is a barrier to finding and using information and support services
- Service providers can help women to find supportive care services.

Recommendations:

1. Broaden access to peer support options for women with cancer in rural and regional areas; (see also next steps)
2. Collaborate with general practice to raise awareness of the information and support needs of patients diagnosed with cancer;
3. Increase awareness of state-wide websites (either existing or in the process of development) that list relevant support services by improved promotion of these initiatives;
4. Identify opportunities for the provision of local information hubs where they do not exist; and
5. Provide education (regular and targeted) for service providers about non-clinical issues for people diagnosed with cancer.

Next steps:

The unique BreaCan model, based on highly trained and strongly supported volunteers to provide information and support to women with cancer, could be extended into rural settings. A hub and spoke model could be developed, where a city resource centre is used as a base working with local health service partners in the country, to extend coverage in regional and rural Victoria.

This model:

- builds on existing expertise and resources
- can be provided at limited additional cost and
- increases the information and support options available to women with cancer in rural and remote areas.

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