



# A survivor's story

From the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

## "We didn't have Slip, Slop, Slap back then"

Malcolm Chandler's story as told to Meg Rynderman, a consumer representative of the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre. November 2020



Fair-skinned, inheriting his mother's Scottish genes, Malcolm Chandler grew up on the sunny beaches of Perth in the 1960s. I spoke with him and heard his story via Zoom during Melbourne's stage 4 COVID lockdown.

At the age of 46, Malcolm noticed a white pinhead sized bubble on his chest which had grown to thumbnail size within four days. A friend urged a visit to a dermatologist.

"I thought it wasn't melanoma because I thought they're dark coloured and mine was white. As it turns out, it was probably one of the most aggressive melanomas you could get."

At that time, Malcolm was working in Melbourne. The 'bubble' was excised, and surgery followed at St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne to remove the melanoma and surrounding tissue. No further treatment was required, and within eight weeks, Malcolm had returned to work.

A single man with a busy work schedule, Malcolm labelled his cancer "the nuisance". Apart from a substantial scar, he put the episode behind him.

He reflects: What I had was a result of sailing and swimming when I was in my 20s.

**"We didn't have Slip, Slop, Slap back then. Just get burnt and peel the skin off. It will regrow on lips, chests and backs. Who needs sunscreen or a hat?"**

For the next 16 years, work commitments took Malcolm to various parts of Australia. Grateful for the positive result he had experienced from his treatment, Malcolm was keen to support the ongoing research undertaken by his surgeon, and over the years has donated to relevant charitable campaigns.

The prospect of a new job back in Melbourne prompted a medical check-up before leaving Perth. Everything was clear, apart from an irregular stool sample containing traces of blood, which necessitated a colonoscopy. The surgeon removed a polyp that was located high up in Malcolm's colon.

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Waiting to receive his results, Malcolm recalls feeling very alone in the empty waiting room. He thought at the time that if you are alone in a specialist's waiting room, 'you may have an issue.'

The pathology results were proof of metastatic cancer.

Within 24 hours, Malcolm was on a plane to Melbourne for an appointment at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre (Peter Mac) with his original surgeon. He had several hastily arranged scans of broad areas of his body, including magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), computed tomography (CT) and positron emission tomography (PET). The scans revealed 'hot spots' (metastatic cancers) in his brain, left lung, left buttock and colon.

He reflects, "No one told me to put my affairs in order. At that early stage, they probably thought 'there won't be time'. They didn't think I'd last that long."

Malcolm remembers the exact words his surgeon spoke when delivering a diagnosis of stage IVC melanoma. "If you were sitting in front of me 17 years ago, I wouldn't have been able to help you. But now we've got this magic stuff – you're going to go through immunotherapy."

Immunotherapy, the use of medicines to stimulate a person's own immune system to recognise and destroy cancer cells more effectively, has proven very effective in treating people with advanced melanoma.

Malcolm stayed in Melbourne and was scheduled for infusions of two drugs, at three-week intervals, over 12 weeks. He explained that, as he understood it, the greatest cause for concern was the 'hot spot' in his brain.

"They thought if they could get the brain metastasis under control, they could then operate on the others if necessary." Scans at 10 weeks indicated a successful outcome.

Having experienced diagnosis, surgery and recovery the first time on his own, Malcolm was grateful for the care and support of his partner and her daughter as he went through immunotherapy. He describes his partner as "a gem" and that "she was the champion through all the grim and awful stuff".

He feels strongly that he too, as the patient, had a supportive role.

**"My job was to support them - for those around you, supporting you, it's crucial to keep them on board, even if you're feeling unwell."**

Malcolm doesn't think of himself as a survivor or relate to the term 'survivorship', explaining "I don't like the word, it's not in my vocabulary. I don't really dwell on the past – you play with the cards you're dealt in life; I've had two cards so far. I'm always thankful for 64 years."

**Malcolm had three t-shirts printed to wear into Peter Mac for treatment with slogans that inspired him:**

—  
Dwell on the past and go backwards, focus on the future and go forward.

—  
The best is yet to come.

—  
Life is too short to shop.



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He reflects that he has never succumbed to self-pity, observing that "seeing others whose treatment might not be going so well makes you think how lucky you are".

He describes himself as having a "proactive mindset – it's not a matter of 'woe is me', but rather, what do we need to do? How are we going to fix it? I've got things to do, places to go, this is an interruption to that".

He has reflected on the elements that he considers essential to a successful outcome. "Between the ears is a big part of this – if you put your feet up into the air and curl up into a ball, of course, the outcome is not going to be good."

## He urges others to:

- Keep positive and avoid self-pity – "Not always easy as some days are diamonds and some days are stones. If you remain positive, your support team will also pick up the vibe"
- Try to have a good support team around you
- Keep healthy
- Eat well – fresh and green
- Remain active and exercise to the level you can "even if it's only a five-minute walk, it will assist – I know"
- Be SunSmart
- If you smoke – quit
- If you drink alcohol in excess – stop
- Keep your brain active
- Rest and maintain your sleep patterns – "If an afternoon nap is required, take it. It is your body speaking to you"
- Be patient – side effects can be exhausting and can last for months

He cautions launching back into life too quickly. "Don't book a ticket to climb Mount Everest. Instead, smell the flowers for a month or two before actioning any plans for travelling or anything above normal exertion."

Malcolm has returned to live in Perth, but journeys to Peter Mac every six months for MRI scans and a consultation with 'the Prof', as he affectionately refers to his surgeon.

He marvels at the advances in treatment from his first diagnosis until now, musing that his later diagnosis would have been untreatable if he had presented with it all those years ago.

He reflects on "the great work they're doing at Peter Mac", commenting that "the 'nuisance' is manageable and is treatable now" though hopes that, with further research, one day "we'll have a magic tablet".



## Resources

- **ACSC fact sheets**

- » Coping with cancer: Emotions and side effects
- » Coping with cancer: Practical and social support
- » Prevention and screening
- » Diet, exercise and lifestyle

All fact sheets available from:

[petermac.org/services/support-services/cancersurvivorship/survivors-and-carers/resources](http://petermac.org/services/support-services/cancersurvivorship/survivors-and-carers/resources)

- **Common Survivorship Issues Directory**

[petermac.org/survdirect](http://petermac.org/survdirect)

- **ACSC (general)** [petermac.org/cancersurvivorship](http://petermac.org/cancersurvivorship)

- **Melanoma-specific information**

- » Peter Mac immunotherapy videos for patients [petermac.org/services/cancer-information-resources/videos-what-expect-immunotherapy](http://petermac.org/services/cancer-information-resources/videos-what-expect-immunotherapy)
- » Melanoma Patients Australia [melanomapatients.org.au](http://melanomapatients.org.au)
- » Melanoma Institute Australia [melanoma.org.au](http://melanoma.org.au)
- » What to expect – Melanoma, Cancer Council [cancer.org.au/about-cancer/cancer-pathways-what-to-expect.html](http://cancer.org.au/about-cancer/cancer-pathways-what-to-expect.html)

- **Support lines**

- » Cancer Council 13 11 20
- » National Melanoma Support Line 1300 884 450



## Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

Celebrating *10 years* of progress

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