



a survivor's story

From the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre



Richard Gardner's story, as told by Meg Rynderman, a consumer representative for the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

January 2015

'God I'm lucky, dead lucky'

Richard Gardner

A family history of breast cancer, his working history with the Department of Agriculture and almost 40 years in the Country Fire Authority suggested some health issues could occur in later life.

"In those days we worked with experimental herbicides down at the vegetable research station and we were a lot more careful later on than we were then," Richard Gardner, now aged 67, recalls#. In the fire brigade, "no one cared about asbestos buildings and on the Peninsula there were lots of them".

When he found a lump in his neck almost 24 months ago he started a round of doctors' visits and tests. First, his general practitioner (GP) of many years ordered blood tests and biopsies; then, following a speedy referral to a local oncologist close to Richard's home on the Mornington Peninsula, he had a full body scan.

Richard and his wife Karen anticipated a cancer diagnosis for the lump in his neck. The news the oncologist gave them was totally unexpected. Scans indicated

another, unrelated cancer in his bowel.

Richard's response was unusual. "I said, well thank goodness, I'm glad you found that. God I'm lucky, dead lucky, I would never have known. I had no symptoms. I'd really been working on my health because we were due to go away on my wife's first lot of long service holidays and all that just went out the window."

Richard was diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma of the right tonsil, spread to the neck, and colon cancer. A whirlwind of consultations and negotiations with different doctors followed to plan surgeries and treatments. He had a tonsillectomy and the decision was made to treat the tonsil cancer with radiotherapy and chemotherapy at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre (Peter Mac).

"So from there, down to Peninsula Private [Hospital] for a bowel operation. The whole time Peter Mac's saying, 'When's he going to be ready?' because they were concerned that the neck one

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would get away." During the bowel surgery Richard was told that in three weeks the cancer had grown from the size of a thumbnail to the size of a fifty cent piece. It all took place within a month and Richard and Karen had to cancel their planned trip.

Richard's hospital medical teams planned a treatment protocol for both cancers involving intensive radiotherapy and chemotherapy for three weeks, a break of a month and then further chemotherapy every second week for five months.

I recently met Richard Gardner at Peter Mac. I was struck by his genuine respect and affection for the health professionals he encountered during his treatment. He particularly included the support from his GP, as well as

those who cared for him at Peter Mac. He talks of his hospital 'mentors': two 'brilliant' associate professors and the frontline staff – nurses and radiation technicians. "I can walk in here now and there are a couple of them in particular and they'll say 'good day' and we'll share big hugs. We're really personal about the whole thing. We (Karen & I) both found that enormously special. It was beautiful."

"I had wonderful relationships with them. We laughed and we joked"

The easy communication with staff and other patients helped Richard and Karen deal with his situation and improve the quality of his care.

"I had wonderful relationships with them. We laughed and we joked. That, to me, is the part of this organisation [Peter Mac] that I don't think people see or appreciate, because they do it every day. I reckon [the staff] know the ones it's going to work with and they know the ones who are going to really struggle. And to be given an insight into [other patients'] lives – to me it was an experience."

Richard says that "you forget the terrible bits, the bits on your own, a couple of the weird dreams. But you remember people, everyday people". For example, he appreciates how the patient ambulance coordinators planned his trips from the Peninsula and the kindnesses of the visiting district nurses.

Richard valued his GP's support and encouragement, highlighting the importance of maintaining GP involvement before, during and after treatment. He had a positive relationship with his GP, which provided reassurance and helped keep the whole team up to date.

"I kept going back to see my GP after every couple of treatments just to say, 'Hey here I am and whatever'. I see him as the overseer and the team there were fantastic. They cared how I was going and helped with all my health, not just the cancers."

During treatment, Richard and Karen spent their treatment breaks being tourists in Melbourne. "We saw the change in the plants in the conservatory, which is something I





love anyway. We went for walks in the park. Horticulture is my work. We saw the changing seasons, we saw the autumn change into the winter. We saw Melbourne in a beautiful time and we used that special time just to be together."

When anyone asked Karen what she did for her long service leave, she said, "We've been to Resort Peter Mac."

Several bouts of chemotherapy and radiotherapy dramatically affected Richard. He and Karen dealt with them with humour, in their understated manner. "We had other things going on in our lives that were equally as important. This was just a little speed hump that

we didn't really expect and there it was." When anyone asked Karen what she did for her long service leave, she said, "We've been to Resort Peter Mac."

Cancer and its treatment can take a heavy toll on carers and family members and they, too, need support. Fortunately, the large family of four children and nine grandchildren were able to help Richard and provide mutual support as well.

"We've always been a family that's communicated, so it was never something that was foreign. Even today we mightn't see each other [often] but there would at least be a phone call once a week around them all."

Richard was also well supported by

friends. Even if he wasn't feeling well, he made an effort to get up to talk to friends when they visited, not necessarily about his health but about what his friends had been doing. "It was a beautiful way to stop you feeling sorry for yourself." Some friends surprised him with their concern: a farming friend regularly made the trip from Albury especially to see Richard and the two men became much closer friends as a result.

Richard and Karen relied on their doctors and nurses for information but also gathered information independently, finding benefit in becoming more informed and more involved in managing aspects of Richard's treatment and its effects. They kept records of his diet, blood pressure and

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temperature, took notes when visiting specialists and asked "the frontline staff" for their advice. They also sought and valued information from the Australian Cancer Survivorship Information Centre.

Richard finally finished his chemotherapy on Christmas Eve, 2013. Reflecting on what he had gained from his experience, Richard says, "I enjoy everyday little happenings, like little kids that will grin at you over someone else's shoulder or just funny little things that will happen that I wouldn't have had time for [before]. I guess what I'm saying is I've learned to find time to smell the roses.

"Every day is far more important than it used to be. I'm not interested in having arguments, not interested in scoring points." He has stepped back from some community activities, "because it's doing you no good when you're rushing around trying to do everything for everybody".

Asked what advice he would give to others going through diagnosis and treatment, Richard says, "I'd be telling them to take every opportunity of every support they'd been offered and to make sure that they remained in control of what was happening. I mean physically in control, that you know what's

happening, you are happy with what's happening and you have absolute faith in the people that are giving you those treatments."

Richard and Karen are planning retirement in rural Victoria. Twelve months after the end of treatment, he is not totally comfortable with the term 'survivor'. "I think of survivors as people that have been through great floods, fires, holocausts, those sorts of things."

Richard gives credit to all those involved with his diagnosis and treatment. "It wasn't me – it was a bloody big team effort that got me [through]. I could never have done it on my own. I've been given a second chance."

#this is the opinion expressed by Richard Gardner. Any link between chemical exposure and his diagnosis has not been confirmed.



Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre

A Richard Pratt Legacy



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