



a survivor's story



From the Australian Cancer Survivorship Centre



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

August 2014

'Much more than a tree change'

Roger Moulton

It was their dream – to retire and move to the country. A new relationship in their early 50s, a small business and a farm; everything was working out the way they had planned.

"I was getting ready for an easing off and being a farmer later in life. We'd bought a couple of hundred acres at Ballan, just off the freeway, and later we bought a little olive grove at Avoca."

Recently I met Roger Moulton, expecting to hear the story of a man who had cared for his wife through her cancer experience. I was unaware that, at exactly the same time, Roger had gone through his own cancer journey.

"And then in 2009 I was diagnosed with prostate cancer and in the same month my partner was diagnosed with basaloid squamous anal cell carcinoma."

Olive and Roger had moved to Ballan (half an hour from Ballarat, an hour and a half from Melbourne). Their children and grandchildren were living in different parts of the country and their friends were in Melbourne.

They married soon after they finished their respective treatments.

Far from their loved ones, whose support came via phone calls and messages, they both began the regimen of testing and treatment for their cancers.

"I had six weeks of external beam radiotherapy followed by two months of hormone therapy. Olive had six weeks of radiotherapy and two chemotherapy sessions. Hers was more of [an] emotional rough ride than mine because it was early diagnosed but it can be a very aggressive cancer. That's very stressful for her and very stressful as a carer too, because what can you do? What can you say? Just be supportive."

Roger explained that they became each other's carer while dealing with their own treatments, supporting each other physically and emotionally. "We're both pretty self sufficient."

Treatment was performed half an hour away in Ballarat. They shared driving to and from treatment. Olive would sometimes take advantage of a local transport



service when Roger needed to work. "I might have treatment early in the morning and go to Avoca, stay overnight and come back. So if she had a treatment she'd get the local transport."

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Roger spoke gratefully of the support he and Olive received from their specialists, technicians and nursing staff. It was the nurses at the Ballarat Austin Radiation

Oncology Centre who informed them of the availability of transport to and from treatment.

With the two having differing treatment schedules and experiencing different reactions from treatment, Roger took on many of the household chores. He explained that planning was paramount. "I could put time into myself and have a nana nap in the afternoon; [I was] also cooking and being there for Olive. It's a matter of planning – time planning and getting in touch with your body and your emotions, I guess."

Both suffered side effects from their treatment. Roger commented on

the need for ongoing support such as counselling, even though he and Olive had chosen not to access local services. He highlighted one of the issues confronting those living in rural areas: "You could go to counselling, but it's a bit too close to home. Now, that's an issue that's rural, because everybody knows everyone's business. Even if you have the greatest trust in that person, it's not fair to yourself or that person because, you know, you'll be at a dinner party next week or a work meeting. Not ideal."

Roger reflected on the impact on their lives. Olive, the first Housing Industry Association-registered woman builder in Victoria, could not manage the physical demands of her work and had to close her business. Roger found that with "lots and lots of physical work to do, with very little energy to do it, with diagnosis and treatment – that has an economic impact, too." With a diagnosis in your 60s, there is a financial strain. Roger explained: "It's cost us [so much] in opportunity costs and in your 60s you haven't got enough time [to catch up]. You're looking at retirement. That's the biggest thing, it's not the cost of the treatment, it's opportunity costs, and that's never talked about, never considered."

Cancer treatment and diagnosis often result in unexpected life changes. This was certainly true for Roger. His and Olive's experience with cancer generated a passion in him to improve cancer care for others. After treatment he was employed as a consumer engagement representative



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with the Grampians Integrated Cancer Service. His work includes encouraging consumer involvement in the Ballarat and Regional Integrated Cancer Centre, which offers complementary therapies, family activities, carer activities, support groups and information.

Distance, transport and accommodation can be major impediments to the thousands of regional and rural people diagnosed with cancer in Victoria each year. Roger explains: "Transport and accommodation are still major issues. We have Rotary House and there was a floor at Ballarat Health Service dedicated to accommodation and there is VPTAS [the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme], which offers 17c/km and \$35/night for accommodation. That's for patients

and carers. But you have to be over 100 km away for it to apply. If you were 99 km, it wouldn't apply and it's taken from post office to post office, rather than a flat rate."

Through the Grampians Integrated Cancer Service, Roger has spent the last two years working on transport for the region. "There are 35 vehicles from Melton to the border of varying types and capacity that are dedicated to transporting hospital patients. [We now] have quite a detailed list of all this information available to offer to people, so they have probably 30 different methods of getting from A to B if they have to. Every one is different – some are free, some are not." People can learn more about the service by contacting the Grampians Integrated Cancer Service or the social worker at the Ballarat and Regional Integrated

Cancer Centre.

Roger feels that people need to make the most of support systems, citing the Cancer Council Helpline, support groups for different cancers and general practitioners as examples. "A lot of it is to do with emotional strength from the outset: not everyone needs [a great] level of emotional support; others need to have their hand held from the word go." His advice to others is: "There are support systems: recognise what they are, seek help to be shown what those support systems are, and use them".

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His involvement with cancer patients and their needs has awakened in Roger a sense that cancer patients most of all need empathy and compassion. Roger volunteers for Cancer Council Victoria's Cancer Connect peer support program, which he feels fits with his desire to offer empathy and compassion to others undertaking their own cancer journey.

"If you've got a question or a doubt, either ring 13 11 20 (the Cancer Council Helpline) or someone else." For instance your

regional Integrated Cancer Services, McGrath breast care nurses, cancer resource nurses or prostate cancer nurses. "They'll direct you to someone who can help you. Don't be overwhelmed."

Roger's tree change did not go quite as he had planned. As it often does, life imposed itself. He talked of his survivorship: "I do say we are now five-year survivors. But that's only sort of from a statistical point of view: we've still got plans and life and things we want to do. I am a survivor because I'm still alive."

"You've been diagnosed, you've gone through a journey, for want of a better term, you've gone through the process and you come out – so far you're still alive! But there's a lot more to it than that. It's having the awareness and knowledge and information – it's a privilege to do what I do."

For information and resources regarding cancer survivorship see:

- petermac.org/cancersurvivorship
- petermac.org/cancer-information-resources



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A Richard Pratt Legacy



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