PROFILE

In each edition we will profile an Allied health professional working in cancer or palliative care

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Early Influences

I embarked on my Social Work degree at the University of Queensland directly from school. I am not sure if that was ideal as I had led a somewhat sheltered life. I sensed that my life experience was limited so at the earliest opportunity I headed to the UK to cut my teeth in the real world and to further my education with studying social work at the West London Institute of Higher Education. Hence my first Social Work job was in London. This provided me with the opportunity to experience what life was like in some of the more deprived parts of London. Those were very formative years for me and gave me an excellent grounding in the real world.

After 7 years in the UK, Australia was calling me and I returned to launch my career in my country of origin. Over the years I have worked at various hospitals both in NSW and QLD. In 1992 I was most fortunate to be appointed as the first Health Rights Officer to the Health Rights Commission established to provide an independent statutory body to assess consumer’s complaints. Undoubtedly the key to resolving complaints was a capacity to actively listen to what had happened to the person and to facilitate clear and open communication. Social Work training and working within the complexities of the tertiary hospital system had provided me with a sound basis for this work.

Palliative Care Work

In 1998 I joined the Princess Alexandra Hospital as Senior Social Worker (Cancer Services). Initially I worked in the surgical areas – head and neck cancer and hepatobiliary wards (pancreatic/gall bladder cancer). I found myself drawn to working with patients and families referred to palliative care through the service. At this time palliative care was embryonic to say the least. There were 2 clinical nurses and a medical specialist who visited twice per week. There was no team approach at all and it was certainly challenging to establish a psychosocial focus. My social work role in palliative care was and continues to be a consultative one.

Since then the palliative care service has dramatically expanded and allied health have become a key component with the recognition that psychosocial care is a core aspect of care for the dying. I have been able to negotiate a half time clinical position dedicated to palliative care which in conjunction with my management role keeps me very busy! However I believe this is under resourced and I firmly believe that all patients referred to the service should be provided with the opportunity to see a social worker. Apart from the practical issues confronting palliative patients, I passionately believe the opportunity to have someone listen and honour your life story and to reflect what this life has been for you is vitally important.

As in other parts of my professional career I have learnt so much from the patients and their families and I am humbled by what I have been taught by those facing end of life. It was one particular family that taught me the...
importance of hearing one's story and having the opportunity to create a legacy for those left behind. This has become my passion and stimulated me in 2012 to apply for a Churchill Scholarship to research best practice in this field. This scholarship enabled me to participate in a Dignity Therapy workshop in Canada and I returned to Australia determined to disseminate all that I had learnt at the workshop.

Key Achievements

- **Parental grief and loss.** Development of a handbook for parents of premature/sick babies: This project emerged while working in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at the Westmead Centre in Sydney, from talking to the parents about what they needed. Many parents shared their story with me and yet again it reinforced for me the value of listening. In terms of infant loss, I came to appreciate the importance of helping families to grieve in a healthy way and that as health professionals we have a responsibility to ensure that this is facilitated.

  **Support Groups:** At Westmead and also at the Royal Women's Hospital Brisbane (where I also worked in NICU) I established and facilitated a weekly support group for parents. I firmly believe one should not underestimate the support that one can gain from sharing with those experiencing the same journey.

- **Life biographical project.** Working within palliative care at the Princess Alexandra Hospital I have been challenged to help people find meaning as end of life approaches. After assisting a patient to create a written legacy for his young sons, I was keen to review the impact and potential of this work with other patients. I was successful in obtaining funding for a quality project “Life biographical project”. The outcomes were very positive and this project was presented at a number of forums including Oncology Social Workers Conference and was awarded best presentation. Again I reflect on the key ingredient – hearing what matters to the person.

- **Churchill Fellowship 2012.** To progress my desire to research best practice in the field of life biographical work, I was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 2012 which enabled me to travel to New Zealand, Canada and the UK. I would commend others to consider applying for a Churchill scholarship. In Canada, I was able to participate in a Dignity Therapy workshop facilitated by Dr Harvey Chochinov. I was very impressed with this and determined that my colleagues in Australia should also have this opportunity. He agreed to come to Australia to facilitate this if I could organise it.

- **Dignity Therapy Workshop.** As a result of above, I am planning and organising a “Dignity Therapy Workshop” scheduled for February 2014. I consider this a key outcome from the Churchill Scholarship and I anticipate will have long term positive outcomes for the care of the dying and their families. I would commend anyone interested in helping patients find meaning at end of life to consider applying to attend. Unfortunately the numbers will be limited and Dr Chochinov's reputation will ensure the demand will outstrip available places.

My reflections

Throughout my career in social work I have been encouraged to continue to develop my practice and to seek educational opportunities. I think one learns both from formal learning opportunities as well as one’s own life experiences. I feel very grateful to the patients and families I have met throughout my career who taught me so much about life and coping with adversity.

If anyone would like more information about the process to apply for a Churchill scholarship or the “Dignity Therapy Workshop” which I am organising in February 2014 then please email me at sherryl.searles@health.qld.gov.au