



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
PROOF
ADJOURNMENT
Breast Cancer
SPEECH

Tuesday, 11 September 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Tuesday, 11 September 2012
Page 63
Questioner
Speaker Urquhart, Sen Anne

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator URQUHART (Tasmania) (19:05): Three simple words and one short phrase: 'I love you'. We all know they mean so much. For a woman who has lost a breast to breast cancer, hearing those three words from her partner is one of the most important parts of the healing process. In the words of some of these women: 'To know that you find yourself attractive and that your partner still finds you attractive', 'to know that there is more to your love than your breasts'. For a lot of couples, this process is really difficult. During such a traumatic time, a discussion about love and attraction is often not a top priority.

Support is needed, and support is currently provided to some women and their partners in the form of a breast care nurse: a health professional who is trained to manage the care of breast cancer patients throughout the course of their treatment. The breast care nurse is the focal point between the patient and the specialists who coordinate their treatment—whether it is surgery, radiotherapy or chemotherapy. These specialist nurses play an important advocacy role as well as helping to clarify technical or complicated information that the patient may not understand. Most importantly, they provide emotional support to the patient; they are a friend and a counsellor for the patient and their family.

There are currently no dedicated breast care nurses on the north-west coast of Tasmania, a region that sees around 100 referrals a year to the breast care nurse service and that currently provides about three days per fortnight of breast care nursing to these patients. Our two part-time breast care nurses do the job off the side of a desk, with their main roles in the equally important area of stomal therapy. They call themselves the 'pink and brown' team and do a great job in both.

I had the good fortune of meeting one of our breast care nurses last week, Tracey Beattie. Tracey works out of the North West Regional Hospital in Burnie, combining the roles of stomal therapy and breast care nursing. Tracey is a wife, a mother of two teenage daughters and a registered nurse. She is a dedicated practitioner who wants her clients to have the best of care. Tracey has a real passion for her breast care work. One minute she could be demystifying medical lingo for clients, the next she could be providing the emotional support to a couple that I outlined earlier. Other times she could be guiding clients on where to start when diagnosed with breast cancer.

Health professionals at the North West Regional Hospital and the Mersey Community Hospital are in the process of making a submission to the McGrath Foundation for a full-time breast care nurse in our region. As part of this submission, the hospitals need to demonstrate a strong level of community engagement for a full-time breast care nurse. I assisted on this front by organising a working mums cocktail reception in Burnie last Monday night. I hosted the event with my Labor Senate colleagues—the first all-female Senate team from any party from any state—and Mr Sid Sidebottom, the member for Braddon. We partnered with the McGrath Foundation and ConnectPink, a social media website for women.

The McGrath Foundation was set up by Jane McGrath, whose own experiences with breast care nurses led her to develop a passionate belief that every woman diagnosed with breast cancer in Australia and their family should be able to benefit from the support of a specialist breast care nurse. Jane's mission was to build an 'army of these nurses'. Since September 2005, the McGrath Foundation has worked to provide a McGrath breast care nurse for every family affected by breast cancer in this country, regardless of where the family lived or their background. Since Jane's passing, her husband, Glenn, CEO Tracey and their team continue Jane's mission.

Over 50 working mums and some partners came out to enjoy some bubbly, some good Tasmanian cheese and discussion with like-minded people—and, importantly, to learn about the work of breast care nurses and to show their support for the application. Tracey made a speech that touched everyone in the room. Earlier, I paraphrased her story about counselling couples about love post operations. She also told of an old lady she was treating in her role as a stomal therapy nurse. This lady had had breast cancer 50 years ago. There were no breast care nurses, no support. Her father did not want to know about the operation. She was left in Launceston with no support from family and friends, desperate for assistance and counselling. Tracey explained that there are many possibilities unlocked if a breast care nurse is employed full time to provide women with the level of care they deserve, to ensure no-one is left behind, as was the case 50 years ago. The nurse could travel to the remote areas like Smithton and the north-west coast to see patients in their own homes and really gauge if they are

doing okay. Programs could be started around wellness and survivorship. These are just not possible with the current three days a fortnight.

After the function was highlighted by our local paper, the *Advocate*, a letter to the editor appeared later last week. Annette Clarke of Wivenhoe wrote:

At a time when the health system is stretched to the limit I was pleased to see *The Advocate* highlight one of the North West's breast care nurses; Tracey Beattie.

From me—and I'm sure those other patients who have been unfortunate enough to need her services—thank you, Tracey.

You and your friendship are by far the best things that have come of my illness.

I thank Annette for her courage in penning the letter to the editor. There is definitely community support for expanding this important service. With over 50 people in attendance we raised \$660 through donations on entry and a pamper pack raffle. Due to sponsorship from Burnie's iKon Hotel, we were able to donate all of these funds to the McGrath Foundation. While \$660 goes only a small way to the fundraising needed for a three-year breast care nurse, it is a positive start.

The McGrath Foundation are continuing Jane's mission and have set a target of increasing the number of breast care nurses Australia-wide to 150 in coming years. They are building support and finance, so that every Australian family going through breast cancer can have access to a McGrath breast care nurse, where and when they need it. It costs approximately \$350,000 to employ a full-time McGrath breast care nurse over a minimum three-year period. The service is free of charge, and families can self-refer without needing a doctor to intervene. This is a major difference to the current part-time model, which requires patients to be referred to the service. The north-west hospitals are saying that their current service is limited and they do not feel it is best practice. The workload relating to stomal therapy is increasing with Tasmania's ageing population. Therefore, the breast care nurse hours are increasingly difficult to incorporate into the roles, and the health professionals see this as an insufficient level of service for patients.

I understand that there is also an application for a full-time McGrath Foundation breast care nurse in Launceston. This is extremely timely as the north-west breast care nurses have recently been advised that support from the north's current breast care nurse for north-west women, following treatment in Launceston, is being withdrawn. This will mean that north-west women will not have access to in-hospital support

when they travel to the north for treatment and that referral pathways will be impacted. North-west patients are at a disadvantage with this recent change in service provision. This increases the need for a full-time breast care nurse in north-west Tasmania.

Further, we are about to commence development of the integrated cancer care centre on the north-west coast. This centre, which has been funded by Labor governments, will see a growth in the number of women seeking treatment on the north-west coast. The centre will increase access to radiology and oncology services in the north-west. It will possess strong links and networks with larger centres in the north and south of Tasmania as well as interstate. This is of course a great thing, as women will be closer to their loved ones during a traumatic time.

The introduction of a dedicated breast care nurse would be instrumental in supporting women diagnosed with breast cancer in our region and would provide a pivotal role in the model of care for our integrated cancer care centre. By financing a breast care nurse for the north-west coast through the McGrath Foundation, we can provide the full-time support to people like Annette. We can ensure that the tragedies of loneliness, like the story of the lady 50 years ago, never occur again. I urge the McGrath Foundation to favourably consider the application by the north-west Tasmanian health professionals.