

Hospice services

At the beginning of August last year I was visited by two people from the West Auckland Hospice who explained the services that the Hospice provides. Like most people I was completely unaware of the many services the hospice provides for patients and their families throughout the end of life process, including all kinds of social care services. I decided to try the art therapy sessions which is described as “a creative process that helps people managing changes in their lives. It offers time with a qualified Art Therapist and provides a space for reflection and expression to help you understand your feelings and coping skills.” Best of all – no skill in art necessary!

Having become totally alienated from my body during the first five months of chemotherapy I decided to see if these sessions could help me overcome my discomfort and disgust with what my physical body had become and how hostile it felt to me. It was actually quite exhausting living inside a body that I felt completely disconnected from. I was also encouraged to take advantage of the free fortnightly half-hour massages on offer. But I repeatedly turned down the offer as I simply could not imagine anyone wanting to touch me.

After several art therapy sessions in which I drew raw and simple pictures of my body complete with my hostile digestive tract and the cancer (drawn in black crayon) and talking about my feelings, I felt a shift starting to occur. Some weeks later I felt ready to try a half hour back and shoulders massage. The very first massage was just amazing. For the first time since my diagnosis I reconnected to some positive feelings arising from my train wreck of a body. These positive feelings continued to grow and after three sessions I realised that I was now comfortably living in my body again. What a relief that was!

I continue with fortnightly art therapy sessions as I get so much out of being able to express myself on paper. The fact that I can't draw and I am not creating works of art is not an issue. Nor is it the point of the exercise. These sessions have seen me through some really tough times as I work on expressing my feelings through my crude but immensely satisfying – and revealing – crayon drawings.

The hospice also provides many other free services such as counselling for patients and their families, carers information services, nursing and social work clinics, as well as sessions on grief and loss, and things that matter.

These services help the living make an art of dying. For me they have contributed to my well-being and to my ability to stay positive even as I approach the end of the line.

[CBC's "the fifth estate" on Canada's drug problem](#)

On Friday 13 January Canada's CBC's "the fifth estate" programme featured a topic that has been an issue of concern to me for more than a decade – the high cost of pharmaceutical drugs. At the end of last year several people from CBC's *the fifth estate* team came to New Zealand to investigate New Zealand's solution to the problem – the establishment of PHARMAC – for an episode which focuses on what they refer to as Canada's drug problem.

Canada is the only country in the world that has universal health care but no universal drug coverage. That means millions of Canadians cannot afford life-saving medication; they are splitting their pills, cutting back on their

prescriptions, going deep into debt – and sometimes even dying. I was one of a number of people in New Zealand who were interviewed for this programme which can be viewed at:

<http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/episodes/2014-2015/the-high-cost-of-pharmaceuticals-canadas-drug-problem>

UPDATE: Here is a link to the same program on YouTube:

Hassling Waitemata DHB for the next CT scan

I had a wonderful week at Pukehina beach, followed by five days in Whangamata with all my children and five of my grandchildren. The days in Whangamata began with my second son bringing me a cup of tea first thing in the morning, sitting on my bed and then chatting about things like what lies ahead, the decisions to be made, how we are feeling, our work, etc. My daughter joined us on the second morning and these conversations resulted in important and potentially life-changing discussions and decisions amongst the others. It was truly an amazing and emotionally rewarding five days.

UPDATE: A few photos of our day trip up to Hot Water beach



However I returned from holiday to find myself having to go into battle for my next CT scan. My oncology clinic appointment on Tuesday 10 January focused on whether I would be turning up for the next three chemotherapy sessions. As I hadn't even been given a date for the next CT scan I was urged to resume hassling Waitemata DHB and not give up until I had an appointment. Dr S. informed me that he had ordered a scan

for me for the first week in January 2017 back in November because he wanted to try and avoid any delays. He also had another three patients experiencing similar problems getting a scan and I think he hoped that I could get things sorted for all of us.

It was difficult to make an informed decision about having further chemotherapy without having the CT scan result which would reveal the effects of the first two months of paclitaxel. So I made an uninformed one – no more chemotherapy until I had had my next scan. And for the next three days I started my day by phoning both Waitakere and North Shore hospitals and was repeatedly referred back and forth between the radiology booking clerks at the two hospitals. On the third day, I was kept on hold for over 40 minutes, and because I was in serious danger of dying from boredom I decided to call the same number on another phone line and see which would get me through first. Much to my delight the second phone call was answered within a few minutes and within an hour I had received a call back advising me that I was booked for a scan first thing on Tuesday morning.

I just hope that the other three patients of Dr S also got their appointment times as well. It's exhausting having to fight so hard to get what you need to make an important decision about your future treatment.