

SMICS SPOTLIGHT ON CLINICIANS AT THE CENTRE OF PATIENT CARE

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Tell us about yourself and how you came to be involved in the metastatic breast cancer nurse training program?

I work part time as a metastatic breast cancer (MBC) nurse practitioner (NP) at Monash Health. In the midst of the 2020 COVID lock down, I also started an additional part time job as Chief Clinical Lead for Education at the McGrath Foundation.

In 2012, my career took a new and unexpected direction, working in a dual role at Monash Health as a breast care nurse and an oncology research nurse co-ordinating breast cancer clinical trials. A SMICS breast cancer tumour board consumer identified a supportive care gap for those with MBC within our organisation and local region. It was recognised that those with MBC were not getting optimal supportive care in comparison to those who were diagnosed and being treated for earlier staged breast cancers.



In response to this I applied for a SMICS project to develop and promote both locally and nationally a new model of care for MBC nursing. The project was adapted to suit a Nurse Practitioner (NP) role, to take advantage of a Department of Health and Human Services grant that was available to develop new NP models of care. I consequently found myself back at university studying to complete a Masters of NP whilst simultaneously starting a new MBC NP candidate role at Monash Health. This time was a steep learning curve for me as I began to increase my scope of nursing practice whilst integrating a new model of care in the organisation and promoting MBC nursing roles at state and national cancer conferences.

Soon after becoming endorsed as a NP in early 2017, the McGrath Foundation and Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) successfully lobbied to the Federal Government to fund 30 MBC nursing roles around Australia. There is a recognised need for the provision of practical training for these new nursing roles, to upskill breast care nurses and to ensure those with MBC around Australia are getting their complex supportive care needs optimally met.

What is the most rewarding aspect of your role?

I feel very proud to have helped influence local and national change around Australia, resulting in improved supportive care and health outcomes for those with MBC. The privilege of working in two different roles is incredibly rewarding. Both roles offer variety and the chance to continually evolve and learn by engaging in many leadership, educational and research opportunities.

It is my belief that I have the best of both worlds. Whilst keeping up to date with the latest evidence-based practices in my clinical role at Monash Health, I am also able to provide educational opportunities for breast care nurses in Australia to upskill their knowledge, skills and confidence levels in my education role at the McGrath Foundation. This has a flow on effect to the patients who will consequently receive improved supportive care.

What is it about your work that makes you want to get out of bed each morning?

Every day, I thrive on continually learning and evolving in both my roles, by helping to improve the outcomes of those with breast cancer at a local and national level. By being involved in many advisory committees and professional cancer organisations, I enjoy the opportunities to

influence positive change for those with breast cancer. Advocating for and helping those diagnosed with an incurable cancer, learn to live as well as possible with their disease, whilst empowering them with information and the chance to engage in shared-decision making in all aspects of their care. I believe I can make an enormous difference in many people's lives. Although confronted with many sad and sometimes intense or challenging clinical scenarios, helping others cope better during these times makes my work all worth it, and gets me out of bed ready to face a new day and another new scenario.

What does a typical day at work look like for you?

No two days look the same for me, as every day I am faced with new clinical situations or new projects to work on. Each week my clinical work may involve a mix of many different jobs such as preparing and presenting MBC cases in our multidisciplinary team meeting, undertaking oncology reviews and providing supportive and co-ordinated care to patients in outpatient clinics or in in-patient settings.

I often undertake assessment and triage of symptoms of disease and side effects of treatment over the phone or in person. The work involves using advanced communication skills to build rapport with patients and their significant others over time, as our treatments are resulting in many with MBC living a lot longer with their disease. I work with an incredible team of medical, nursing and allied health staff at Monash Health, who all strive to provide optimal patient-centred care.

The MBC nurse training program is currently under development at Monash Health in collaboration with the McGrath Foundation, SMICS and Monash University. We are all extremely proud of what has evolved to be a major piece of work. Cancer nurses will be able to participate in an individualised training program that involves preliminary online learnings prior to a 3-day observational practicum at Monash Health. Bimonthly clinical supervision for a year follows, to discuss and reflect on case studies and situations encountered in the workplace. Once this program goes live, my work-day will look different again. I will be preparing for and facilitating learning opportunities in the clinical setting to ensure participants have a meaningful educational experience which they can integrate into their own practice and places of work.

How do you manage work/life balance?

Life is certainly busy and often rushed working full time with a family of four and two furry friends. I find constant delight in being a Mum of two beautiful intelligent teenage girls who happily enjoy their school, sporting activities and their wonderful circle of friends. Our dogs are the highest maintenance members of our family who demand a lot of attention but enjoy cuddles and keeping us all active with daily walks. Although I do some additional out of hours work with my two jobs and being on various professional cancer committees, I enjoy the downtime of catching up with friends and family and zoning out with a really good book or movie.

Are there any patient success stories that you can share? There are so many!

Although my cohort of patients have an incurable illness, the treatments for MBC are becoming more targeted and effective at extending the life of many of our patients. I feel grateful for the many cards and expressions of thank you my team and I receive from our patients and their families. An email received from one of my younger patients has resonated the most with me. It included a photo of her looking beautiful and fit whilst hiking in the Olga's in Central Australia and happily looking out at a magnificent view. The photo spoke a thousand words to me, as she was clearly living life to the fullest, being completely in the moment and feeling grateful to be alive. I think we should all take lessons from that!