

Rosemarie's story

- dealing with cancer one day at a time.

When Rosemarie Piontek noticed a lump in her breast, she knew she needed to take action immediately.

Her GP must have felt terrible when she broke the news that it was cancer, as Rosemarie's husband Rainer had died just two weeks earlier.

"I never really got to grieve – after I found the lump, it all went so fast and there were so many tests," Rosemarie said.

"My GP said it [my cancer] had to be dealt with, so I did."

Rosemarie's practical approach to dealing with her illness is not surprising, given her calm outlook and measured personality.

Not many women would describe breast cancer surgery [in July 2015, at Port Macquarie Base Hospital] as "a lovely experience", then send a letter afterwards to say thank you.

As part of the procedure, Rosemarie had a port-a-catheter inserted just under the skin, which she says made some aspects of her treatment easier.

Soon after, she began 10 rounds of chemotherapy at the Mid North Coast Cancer Institute (MNCCI), which is attached to the Base Hospital.

"I went every three weeks from August."

"The [MNCCI] staff were absolutely wonderful, every one of them."

"It was so nice to get to know them and they get to know you, and end up calling you by name."

Rosemarie also speaks highly of the other patients she met, as well as the staff and volunteers.

"I went for chemo one day and there was a lady next to me who had very short hair, and in the back of her head she'd had the pink ribbon shape [the breast cancer symbol] shaved into her hair. It was so clever. I told her that I liked it."



A recent photo of Rosemarie Piontek, feeling well again.

"The [MNCCI] staff were absolutely wonderful, every one of them."

Rosemarie describes the hospital chaplain as “adorable”.

“She was there to offer spiritual guidance, and we talked for hours and hours, probably about everything but spiritual things, but I found it really helpful.”

Asked about the chemotherapy itself, and the physical effects, Rosemarie paints a mainly positive picture.

“The recliner chairs were so comfortable, and there are heated blankets, and cups of tea, and sandwiches.”

“The pink ladies who served the tea, they are wonderful, really wonderful.”

After two rounds of chemotherapy, Rosemarie’s hair started falling out, so she asked her son Alex to shave her head.

“After that I started wearing turbans made from a scarf.”

Just before Christmas 2015, Rosemarie’s hair started to grow back. She laughs out loud when she describes what it was like when it first grew back.

“It came back in tight little curls - I looked like a sheep,” she says, with a chuckle.

Although Rosemarie’s treatment was relatively pain-free, there were times when she didn’t feel great.

“I had a few days at the beginning of the chemo when I really wasn’t feeling all that wonderful, but not to the extent that it stopped me doing things; I could still function and make cakes,” she explained.

“The only part of the treatment I found unpleasant were the biopsies, but I guess you have to expect some of it to be painful.”



When it came to treatment options, Rosemarie’s doctors advised a course of action, and she followed the agreed plan.

Rosemarie’s radiation therapy experience was also straightforward.

“The staff know exactly how to position the beam; they leave the room, then you hear a beeping sound, but I didn’t feel anything.”

“It only takes seconds, and it’s done.”

When it came to treatment options, Rosemarie’s doctors advised a course of action, and she followed the agreed plan.

“These days the doctors are so good and the treatments are so advanced.”

She is also extremely grateful for the practical support provided by her family.

“My son Alex and his partner took it in turns to drive me to my chemotherapy appointments.”

"I had plenty of offers from friends too."

"I imagine it would have been much harder if I was by myself – a strong support network is really, really essential."

Today Rosemarie is looking fit and well, and she remains positive. She'll soon undergo day surgery to have the port-a-catheter taken out.



The only lingering physical signs of her cancer treatment are the pins and needles she experiences in her finger tips.

"I had pins and needles in my finger tips and toes during treatment, but my finger tips are still very sensitive, as if I can feel the nerve endings."

Rosemary needed time to stop and think when asked to describe the type of coping mechanisms she found useful.

"When it comes to coping, what I think I do is departmentalize. At the time, during treatment, I would think to myself 'oh well, this is something that has to be dealt with', and so I would just deal with it, and at the other times, when I was at home, it was different - I tried not to mix the two."

Although Rosemarie never doubted that she would be well again, she says she was willing to accept whatever outcome eventuated.

"Maybe I'm an optimist, but after the first couple of treatments, when things were going alright, I felt positive – I never started to think that way [negatively]."

"I wanted to live my life as I did before, plus the doctors and radiologists and the nurses were all so very positive."

Her advice for others facing serious illness is simple.

"Don't panic. I know it's easy to say, but a diagnosis of cancer doesn't necessarily mean that it's the end - it's only the beginning of the journey you take as you go through with the treatment."

"How you come out at the other end very much depends on the individual, I think."

"Just take one day at a time. Listen to the experts, and do what needs to be done."

**Rosemarie's advice:
Just take one day at a time.
Listen to the experts, and
do what needs to be done.**

Thank you for sharing Rosemarie

More about Rosemarie

Rosemarie Piontek is in her late 70s, and has lived at Lorne, west of the NSW township of Kendall, since 1985.

She is a well-liked member of the community, and has been active with local groups and events including the Kendall National Violin Competition and Watermark Literary Society.

In addition to being a hands-on mother and grandmother, Rosemarie is a talented and prolific baker – she bakes for family and friends, plus twice a week she delivers a range of German cakes and other treats to nearby Kew Corner Store.

Rosemarie chose to share her experiences with the Hastings Cancer Trust "Our Stories" project to "make it easier for other people going through the same thing".



"This is me with my 'sheep' hairdo."

Rosemarie Piontek

"Our Stories" Project – empowering people to share their stories.

To see read more stories, go to www.hastingscancertrust.org.au/our-stories

Contact: OurStoriesProject1@gmail.com



This story was written by Jan Dennis, from interviews and time spent with Rosemarie Piontek in early 2017. It forms part of the "Our Stories" Project, which is funded by a 2016 grant from The Hastings Cancer Trust.

The Hastings Cancer Trust is a local, not-for-profit organisation that supports local cancer services via their annual grants program. For more information go to www.hastingscancertrust.org.au.