

Editorial comment:

Secondary cancer is not categorised as one of the forgotten cancers. However, many of those who are diagnosed with secondary cancer face challenges that are very different to those of a primary diagnosis. It is a journey that is possibly not fully appreciated by those of us who have been lucky enough not to have experienced a diagnosis of secondary cancer.

A forgotten cancer? The delayed onset of secondary tumours

It can be argued that Breast Cancer is one of the most public and published cancer experiences. Newspapers, magazines, television and other media are full of stories of women “battling and winning the fight against breast cancer”. Funding is geared to prevention or a cure for this insidious disease, but spare a thought for those who receive a diagnosis of delayed onset for secondary breast cancer tumours.

A diagnosis of secondary breast cancer can come at any time. Sometimes this happens in the early stages of the original diagnosis, how-

ever, for many women they reach and pass the five year “cured” stage and have moved on with their lives believing that they have won the battle against breast cancer and it is no longer a part of their lives. Imagine the devastation when at any time even ten or more years later they are diagnosed with secondary breast cancer. So often they have been encouraged to believe, and rightly so, that most of them will not die of breast cancer, this is important given that hope is a strong factor in coping well with the psychological issues that arise in the initial stages of diagnosis. There is little media publicity given to secondary breast cancer and consequently for many women it can be seen as an imminent death sentence. It can also be seen as a failure on their part as they have lost the fight against cancer. They do not know why this has occurred and have little understanding of the biological factors that have led to their demise. I thought I was invincible. I had beaten breast cancer with little change to my world. To be told three years later that I had multiple lesions in my liver was a shock to say the least. What could I have done, or rather what didn't I do,

that would have prevented this from happening? There appeared to be little information other than descriptions of what secondary breast cancer was and palliative treatments to answer my questions.

After becoming a Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) Consumer Rep on the Epithelial Mesenchymal Plasticity Breast Cancer Network project (EMPathy) I have learned that there is research occurring for secondary breast cancer it just doesn't seem to get the same publicity that research for early breast cancer prevention/cure or treatment gets. Secondary breast cancer is where cancer cells from the breast spread to other parts of the body. They change their shape, behaviour and molecular make-up to form a recurrent tumour. In targeting this process it is hoped to understand why or when breast cancer may recur in individual's patients and eradicate the cells that have migrated, tailoring treatment to the individual.

I believe that what needs to occur is for an understanding that secondary breast cancer is not a death sentence and many women go on to lead

productive lives managing their cancer as a chronic disease.

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