

Vol 25. No 5. June 2018

# Spectrum >>>>



## In this issue

An interview  
with Julie  
McCrossin

ASMIRT  
awards

International  
travel  
scholarships



WILEY



# A strong voice

**Having being temporarily silenced by cancer, former ABC broadcaster Julie McCrossin is advocating for better information for head and neck cancer radiation patients.**

A career in radio broadcasting saw Julie McCrossin spend plenty of time inside a room alone and under pressure. “I was used to being in a glass box by myself with people on the other side communicating to me through my headset or on a computer screen,” she says.

But this meant nothing when lying on a linac machine receiving her first radiation therapy for stage 4 oropharyngeal cancer while her loved ones waited outside. “I was flushed, having heart palpitations and sweating,” she recalls. “I thought, ‘my god, I’m having a panic attack.’”

There was little time for Julie to prepare for the 30 straight days of radiation and weekly chemotherapy at Sydney’s St Vincent’s Hospital. A month earlier, cancer wasn’t even on the radar for the then 58-year-old. “It never crossed my mind that I could have cancer. Never.”

She’d been to see her GP several times for a sore throat, earache and then two small lumps on her lower neck, but was otherwise well. With no GP referral forthcoming and symptoms persisting, she wrote to Dr Richard Gallagher, surgeon and director of cancer services and head and

neck services at St Vincent’s, who she had seen previously for reflux.

“He sprayed anaesthetic in my left nostril. He then ran a long thin black tube connected to a camera down through my nose to the very lower chamber at the back of my mouth,” she explains.

On the screen, Dr Gallagher pointed to a “huge bundle” of lumps. He said he’d confirm it with a biopsy, but knew what he was looking at.

Julie remembers her first words to him. “I said, ‘If you have to take my voice, do it. I want to live.’ And then he said, ‘That’s good to know,’” she recalls.

“And that’s the moment I knew I was in terrible trouble.”

If cancer was a shock, so was the cause of it. Julie believed smoking caused most head and neck cancers. Yet she hadn’t touched alcohol or tobacco in nearly 30 years. She was stunned to learn her cancer was caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV).

## Feature



Known as the ‘common cold’ of sexual activity, four out of five people have at least one type of HPV at some stage in their lives. HPV is commonly known for causing cervical cancer in women, but it also causes anal and penile cancer in men — and 60 percent of oropharyngeal cancers in both men and women, according to the Cancer Council.

But back to 2013 and that first day of radiation therapy, with Julie isolated and bolted down in an immobilisation mask. “When it was all done, I went outside and sobbed my heart out.”

>> Julie knows that not all radiation patients experience the trauma she did. And she has huge gratitude and praise for the radiation therapists who cured her cancer <<

Now, five years on and cancer free, Julie knows that not all radiation patients experience the trauma she did. And she has huge gratitude and praise for the radiation therapists who cured her cancer.

But she believes there should be better uniform support for a patient’s emotional wellbeing and psychosocial health during and after treatment. This includes ensuring all patients are given options to cope with the mask (such as visual education), mild sedation, music, access to a clinical psychologist and specialised nursing support.

>> When it was all done, I went outside and sobbed my heart out <<

To help achieve this, she’s become an ambassador for Targeting Cancer and a patron of Beyond 5, a charity that supports head and neck cancer patients.

There’s already been success; a group of radiation oncologists, psychologists and young doctors connected to the University of Sydney has initiated new research into this area.

Julie is also working with ACT chief medical physicist Dr Sean Geoghegan to create scale model radiation machines to show patients an accurate visual of what they will experience. Such models, complete with Barbie and Ken dolls as patient stand-ins, have helped prepare children for radiation.



An even simpler way to support patients, also used with children, would be giving them a cord to communicate with someone outside the room. Julie says feeling her partner, Melissa, tug back reassuringly on a cord would have helped ease the “rising panic” she felt during radiation in her immobilisation mask.

Julie’s mask, which she prefers to call a “safety mask”, has been featured in Casula Powerhouse Art Centre’s *Bravery Unmasked* art exhibition, where patients transform their masks into something powerful. Julie decorated hers with white cotton to represent the clouds she eventually learned to visualise to stay calm during treatment.

Through Targeting Cancer, she’s made a video series that gives a frank and detailed account of her journey, including the continued physical impact radiation has



once a patient finishes treatment. “As people say, it’s a gift that keeps on giving,” she jokes.

While her world was “turned upside down” during treatment, Julie says “fantastic pain relief and fantastic support” from a dietician, speech pathologist and radiation oncologist helped her to keep swallowing and avoid artificial feeding. Even so, she lost 20kg in six weeks because it took one hour to drink a cup of liquid food.

In the videos, she also talks about having depression for the first time. “I think it was a natural reaction to a physical, emotional and spiritual — which is obviously the fear of death — onslaught,” she says.

And what about her voice? The tool she used to communicate with her loved ones that was also central to her livelihood? “I did lose my voice for about eight weeks,” Julie says. “But it came back.”

“Yet all the way through my treatment, I felt like the fact that I talk for a living... was absolutely irrelevant,” she explains. “I just thought, ‘I want to live!’”

However, now 63 and busy working as a freelance journalist, facilitator and speaker, Julie is “enormously grateful” for the team of medical professionals who helped to save her voice.

It’s also meant she’s been able to speak up and help prepare others who are about to go through what she did.

## Related links

Targeting Cancer: [targetingcancer.com.au](http://targetingcancer.com.au)

Beyond Five: [beyondfive.org.au](http://beyondfive.org.au)

## HEAD AND NECK CANCER IN AUSTRALIA

- > One of the **10** most common cancers in men and women
- > **4956** new cases diagnosed in 2017 (3625 males, 1330 females)
- > **1026** deaths in 2017
- > **69%** of chance of surviving at least five years (2009-13)

Source: *Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2016*