

40 STORIES IN 40 YEARS

Carmel Smith



Palliative Care Victoria Life Member, Carmel Smith, has worked in community palliative care for over 17 years. In this time, she has become a beacon of light in the Shepparton area for the many people who have faced a life-limiting illness.

Having trained at St Vincent's in the 1970's, Carmel's early career experience was with cancer patients.

"When I first started working I was on the oncology ward at St Vincent's Hospital. Over the years, I did move around a little and did a few courses but I kept coming back to oncology."

"I moved into palliative care about 17 years ago. Before this, I was running the oncology unit at Shepparton Private when I got to a stage in my career that I realised I had been treating people with chemotherapy for a long time and I felt like I wanted to work with them in a different way. I wanted to empower them to know when it might be time to stop treatment and enjoy what time they had left of their life."

"A position came up as an executive manager at Goulburn Valley Hospice Care, a home-based palliative care service in Shepparton, so I applied and was subsequently in that role for 15 years. I still work at Goulburn Valley Hospice Care as a casual nurse now."

"What I love about palliative care is that you are able to improve a person's quality of life. I don't see it as looking after dying people; I've always seen it as looking after people who have an incurable illness and keeping them as well as they can until they die."

Changes in the sector

In Carmel's opinion, the best change in the sector has been the emphasis on a holistic, whole team approach.

"There is now more of a team approach when it comes to palliative care. Back in the day, you never would have had a social worker working with you, but now we have a team that involves a whole range of practitioners including social workers, GP's, a palliative physician, nurses, volunteers – the works."

She also believes that Palliative Care Victoria has played a huge role in improving the palliative care sector.

“One of the biggest factors when it comes to change in the palliative care sector has been the development of Palliative Care Victoria. The fact that they were able to speak to the government on behalf of all palliative care providers has made a real difference to the sector.”

The importance of palliative care in a regional community

Living in a regional hub, Carmel has seen firsthand the impact that community palliative care has had, and in turn the support that the community continually offers the service.

“Community palliative care was born because people started to become more empowered. They were speaking up and saying that they wanted the opportunity to be cared for and to die at home.”

***“People know who we are and what we do.
It is those families and people who have experienced
palliative care in their homes that know what we can
provide that drive us to move forward.”***

“Goulburn Valley Hospice Care just celebrated its 30th anniversary and we still operate our service 7 days a week, 24 hours a day which would not be possible without the support we receive from the community, including fundraising and donations so we can continue providing the extra service.

“There are people involved in Goulburn Valley Hospice Care that have been with us since day one. There is one fellow, we looked after his dad, and he organised an annual bike ride which ran for years and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the service. All of that is money that is put straight back into Goulburn Valley Hospice and goes to the next person that needs the service.”

“There are other special moments too – like walking down the street and have someone come up to you with tears in their eyes and just hug you because you’ve helped them or their loved ones.”

A book to help carers

One of the many incredible achievements Carmel has to her name is the book she created with author, Pippa Wischart titled ‘Precious Time.’

“The palliative care experience can be daunting for both patients and carers, so I wanted to create something for carers to read to let them know how palliative care is and how it can improve their lives. It was also a way for carers to not feel so alone because they could read about experiences from other carers.”

“It is lovely for them to have something small that they can just pick up and read without feeling like it is overly medical. They already have piles and piles of information that is often overwhelming so Precious Time was that small comfort they could read at night when they weren't sleeping.”

“Dying at home isn't for everyone, but it is the preference for many of our patients. That is why we need to ensure we provide as much information for patients and carers as possible, and support them to live as well as possible until it is their time to die.”