

40 STORIES IN 40 YEARS

Irene Murphy



Irene Murphy has achieved a lot in her career. As a regional palliative care nurse practitioner, and with a wealth of experience in the sector, Irene has always been passionate about continuous learning, self-development, and commitment to providing excellence in patient care.

Growing up in Chile, South America, Irene had always been aware of death and dying. In Chile, death is a topic that is openly spoken about. When people experience it, the community comes together in extended kinship to support the families in need, so it was early on in her life when Irene acknowledged that dying is a part of living.

“My culture exposed me to the end-of-life stages. This was a big part of my formation as a person and the beginning of my journey in palliative care.”

“I started my career in the healthcare sector by working in the intensive care unit. When I came to Melbourne, I moved to the oncology department. I enjoyed working in this division however, it was stressful working in acute care settings.”

“Although it was fulfilling to serve patients, there was not enough time to have meaningful conversations with them. I knew that at this point I wanted to be involved in palliative care.”

“I was drawn to a job opportunity at Melbourne City Mission Palliative Care which I was successful in obtaining. During this time, I also undertook post graduate studies and made the decision, encouraged by physicians, managers and colleagues, to undertake further post graduate studies to become a nurse practitioner.”

“I worked at Melbourne City Mission for many years, and it was a tough but fulfilling job. I learnt so much from my colleagues: nurses, counsellors, social workers and physicians alike. Their teachings, wisdom and learnings were invaluable and have continued to accompany me as a trusted friend along the years. After I achieved everything I could in this role, I moved to Gippsland to take on new challenges.”

When Irene moved to Gippsland, she secured a position at the Gippsland Region Palliative Care Consortium as a nurse practitioner mentor, supporting the nurse practitioner candidates in the region. It was an important role where Irene also collaborated with physicians and senior palliative care clinicians to develop tools and guidelines on palliative care best practice.

Following this, Irene obtained the position of nurse practitioner with the Gippsland Regional Palliative Care Consultancy Service, a job where she has “been fortunate to be supported by managers and executives in our team efforts to promote access and equity to specialist palliative care across the region.”

“Both roles have been eye-opening and significantly empowering. I have obtained a deeper understanding of the level of care provided in regional areas compared to the well catered Melbourne Metropolitan Area.”

“My experience in palliative care has been challenging yet fulfilling.”

There have been many highlights across Irene’s career and she has encountered both positive and negative experiences that have left a lasting impression.

“Experiences that have stood out for me are from both a personal and professional standpoint. I will always remember one Saturday night, I visited a 21-year-old man in his home in Carlton, who was dying from a brain tumour.”

“It was so memorable because it was the first time I could identify as the mother with a son who was close to death. It was a pivotal moment and a time of realisation that as caregivers, it is imperative that we do our part effectively, supportively and compassionately so that we can facilitate for the family to have a more supportable yet meaningful experience.”

“This line of work is physically and mentally demanding, but I have been fortunate enough to work with supportive and likeminded individuals. My colleagues, throughout my years of formation have played a critical part in my growth and development as they helped me remain resilient, optimistic, and honest; traits that you can’t learn from a textbook.”

For Irene, working in an industry that can be ‘deeply scrutinised at times,’ being surrounded by a strong and inclusive team is integral.

“I have formed strong relationships with teams over the years. There have been many significant mentors and collaborators. I could name many but two people in particular who

have been key to my journey are Margaret Walker, a palliative care nurse and Mark Boughey, palliative care physician. I met Margaret during my induction to palliative care. She led a group of amazing women and taught me a deeper understanding to care, life, death and about self-knowledge. Her commitment to her job and self-development was outstanding and a major part of my development as a clinician.”

“Similarly, Mark encouraged and fostered clinical leadership, professional impeccability, collegiality, critical thinking and rigour; attributes that are crucial when serving populations with a life limiting illness.”

“Palliative care is an ongoing pursuit of excellence. We must continue the momentum of educating people in the sector.”

There have been many changes across the past 40 years, most of which Irene has seen first-hand. However, she also acknowledges that palliative care will continue to progress as an evidence based specialty with continued education and training resources for the healthcare and palliative care sector and local communities.

“When I first started in palliative care, I didn’t have a strong knowledge around the topic, nor was it widely spoken about. Now, there is plenty of research and resources on palliative care, medicines and service options for clinicians and caregivers.”

“However, there is still a strong and present need to improve access to the palliative care services, especially for Indigenous and other disenfranchised communities such as incarcerated people. We also need to be aware that as palliative care becomes a more renowned specialty, it could run the risk to become “too medicalised”

“To witness the suffering and the adversity of others is incredibly challenging, but it is also empowering as it helps you to review your own life.”

“Palliative care has given me more in life than I expected. It’s provided me a chance to grow, develop emotionally and spiritually in a professional and personal way.”

I am fortunate to currently work with academics and government bodies in Chile and across South America to assist in lifting the profile and added value of palliative care in tertiary educational and primary care settings. I now have a more profound understanding of how fortunate we are in this magnanimous country regarding palliative care funding and access.

To me palliative care can still be a difficult concept to grasp. But I think when it’s done within a team orientated pursuit underscored by knowledge and evidence; essential personal and professional attributes such as effective communication, compassion, empathy, collaboration and patience, can then rise to the fore to make palliative care work endeavour such an elegant thing.”