

# 40 STORIES IN 40 YEARS

## Karen Bryant



Karen Bryant, a proud Gunditjmara woman, describes palliative care as an “essential and righteous service that helps people on their journey to the Dreaming.”

Karen has been working in the Northern region of Victoria for many years. She started her career in the family violence space before moving into the healthcare industry. She is currently the Senior Aboriginal Liaison Officer at Northern Health, a position she has held for more than 14 years. Since starting in this role, Karen has been heavily involved with palliative care, working closely with the Northern Health palliative care consult team.

“My workstation was in the same room as the palliative care consult team, and we have been sharing the same space for 14 years. During this time, I have created unique relationships with the

palliative care consult team, and we continue to learn from one another.”

***“The beauty of my involvement with palliative care is to help educate the Aboriginal community about palliative care services, symptom management and support.”***

“Working closely with palliative care allows us to exchange information and engage in two-way learning opportunities about culture awareness, safety, protocols, how to attend to people’s unique needs in a respectful way and how we should approach palliative care within the Aboriginal community.”

“To date, we’ve had many challenging, comprehensive and educational conversations about palliative care and what it means to patients and the Aboriginal community. For us, Narrun Wilip-giin Aboriginal Support Unit, we have learnt so much and gained a deeper appreciation for the service. We have built fantastic relationship with this discipline which is a great advantage and allows us to promote palliative care to Aboriginal communities, who, at times, are not ready or open to the concept.”

"I think that this unique relationship between our teams has really allowed us to break down the barriers and is a special way to share stories about Aboriginal people. I have been able to talk freely about the stolen generation, our history, Aboriginal lifestyle and sharing stories of patients experience of transgenerational trauma. Letting clinicians know the impact of hospitals and palliative care and how they play an important role in the lives of Aboriginal communities today."

***"I feel privileged to work collaboratively with the palliative care consult team. I know the importance of this service and how it can really impact a person's life in such a positive way."***

Karen has been personally affected and experienced palliative care in many ways throughout her life.

"My first experience with community palliative care was around 20 years ago when my mother was sick. Nineteen years after battling breast cancer, she was then diagnosed in 1998 with lung cancer and her symptoms progressed quickly. Due to my mother's condition, I connected with an Aboriginal healthcare worker in community and a referral was made to community palliative care."

"The carers were brilliant. They attended to my mother's needs and catered to her wishes. Towards the final stages of her life, she was also able to come home, she was provided with the best care and support from the nurses. It was truly remarkable."

"Over 22 years, I have lost five family members, who were all fortunate enough to have some access to palliative care, either in an acute care setting or in the community. Every family member's journey that I have been a part of, has been wonderful, and the workers involved were understanding and compassionate and kind-hearted, very special people."

***"Palliative care helps families manage the anxiety around Aboriginal people's choice of dying at home. They have given me strength while making sure my loved ones were comfortable and not in pain."***

After working closely with the service, and experiencing palliative care firsthand, Karen is adamant that anyone suffering from a life-altering or chronic illness should have access to palliative care, if they wish.

"Regardless of your age, gender, culture, spirituality, or socioeconomic status, everyone should have the right to know their choices on symptom management. They don't have to be at their end stages of life but having access to palliative care early breaks down those fears of feeling pain or experiencing any suffering."

As a Senior Aboriginal Liaison Officer, Karen is incredibly passionate about educating Indigenous communities about palliative care and helping to reduce the stigma typically associated with the service.

“Historically, the Aboriginal people have not experienced the best service from hospitals and were often treated in segregated areas. As a result, Indigenous people are fearful of hospital systems and believe that attending the hospital means that they are going to die.”

***"Although palliative care has been around for a long time, we still need to educate the Aboriginal community about what it is, treatment options and medications, as well as how it can be accessed."***

“I was involved in a project with the Victorian Aboriginal Palliative Care in 2015 for three years. The project was about educating people in our community, bringing people up to date about palliative care and giving them an opportunity to ask for care when they needed it.”

“What motivated me the most was the opportunity to raise with my mob about palliative care. Having an Aboriginal person teach communities about palliative care really encapsulates the service offerings while complimenting the individual's cultural practises; it's fantastic to stand by this because palliative care is open to, and accepts the requests and unique needs of the patient.”

“Death is a reality of life and peak bodies like Victorian Aboriginal Palliative Care and Palliative Care Victoria are advocates for normalising dying and promoting the support groups and medication to help alleviate physical, emotional and mental pain.”

“I think it's important to know what resources such as palliative care is out there. Whenever there a change in your pathway, knowing what support is available to you can truly make a difference to your current stage in life.”