

Mary's journey

Bwngcolman (Palm Island) – First Nations – Cancer of Unknown Primary

Mary is a 60 year old proud Aboriginal woman, who has family connections in Bwngcolman, Townsville & the Atherton Tablelands. She enjoys watching her family play sport, as well as fishing & cooking. After noticing Mary had lost weight & started walking with a limp, a health worker encouraged Mary to have an annual health check.



PRIMARY CARE – PALM ISLAND COMMUNITY COMPANY (PICC)

Mary has her health check with the female doctor, who has always been good with women's business.

INVESTIGATIONS – JOYCE PALMER HEALTH SERVICE (JPHS)

Mary's blood test shows raised tumour markers, while the X-ray of Mary's pelvis reveals a tumour.

CHEMOTHERAPY - TUH

Mary stays with her niece when in Townsville for chemotherapy or scans. The TUH Indigenous Health Liaison Officers (IHLO) & JPHS health workers support Mary & her family.

HEALTH LITERACY / CULTURAL SUPPORT – PICC & JPHS

The health workers & nurses help Mary organise travel to Townsville. They explain the situation many times to help Mary's shocked family understand.

DIAGNOSIS / SPECIALIST CARE – TOWNSVILLE UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL (TUH)

After biopsies & many scans, the multi-disciplinary cancer care team at TUH diagnose Mary with cancer of unknown primary with bone metastases in Mary's hip and spine.

DECLINING FUNCTION

Mary's family don't understand why Mary isn't getting better after the chemotherapy. The physiotherapist & nurses provide education, training & equipment.

PAIN MANAGEMENT AT HOME – SPECIALIST PALLIATIVE CARE

JPHS organise telehealth appointments with the specialist palliative care service at TUH. Mary is very worried about having medications in the house & how to keep the children safe.

BEREAVEMENT

25 members of Mary's family gather at the hospital in her last days. After Mary dies, the nurses assist the family to bath & dress Mary. While the council helps plan Mary's burial.

FINAL HOSPITAL ADMISSION

Mary is showing signs of a spinal cord compression & her pain medications need close monitoring. JPHS nurses & health workers spend many hours preparing Mary's family for her death.

Key Themes:

- Common end of life medications & 2 syringe drivers available at Joyce Palmer Health Service
- For some families, use & storage of controlled drugs in the home is a concern, due to drug misuse & dependency within the community
- Health literacy & support for planning healthcare
- Culturally appropriate health and bereavement services
- Timing & access to advance care planning & specialist palliative care
- Experienced health professionals often need to be strong advocates for patient wishes

Potential issues/barriers:

- Staff shortages – use of agency nurses, adequate medical staffing for patients to be transferred back to JPHS
- Medical teams often keen to transfer people to Townsville
- Limited residential aged care
- Healthcare professionals understanding of eldership
- Late diagnosis due to reluctance to go to Townsville for investigations
- No culturally appropriate pain assessment tools available



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