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Report on ‘Massage for people in hospital’. Gayle MacDonald visit to Australia 2008.

At 8.30pm on the 22 February Gayle emerged from the Custom’s Hall at Sydney International Airport. After a long flight from Hawaii, where she had been teaching for 10 days prior to her travel, and a welcome hug, Chris and I strolled across to the car park to begin our long awaited experience with Gayle. Some three weeks later Gayle shared her first impression of Australia. “Can I walk this slowly for a month?”

On the day of her departure we said farewell to Gayle at Canberra airport exactly a month after she arrived and we were all ‘walking slowly’!

I am only just beginning to realize how much I learnt from Gayle, how much changed in the massage industry because of her visit and how timely this wonder-filled injection of hope is proving to be.

Gayle MacDonald began massaging people in hospital fifteen years go and she tells me that she ‘jumped through every hoop’ that the hospital put before her, and continues to do so to this day. Medical systems are big business and the way business is conducted today, there is nothing surer than change. We must remain flexible and be able to adapt to changing environments so that patients can receive the best quality care.

Today Gayle and her colleagues offer massage to oncology patients in several hospitals around America and there are expanding training programs in America and Scotland. When I invited Gayle to teach in Australia in 2006 I could never have imagined the support that would develop around this project.

Quest for Life funded Eloise to prepare a grant proposal and the NSW Cancer Council (NSWCC) provided a substantial grant so we were able to move ahead with the teaching programs without worrying about the industry response. By November last year, five months before the scheduled date, both programs at Quest for Life were full (48 students) and we had the luxury of a waiting list.

The NSWCC asked Gayle to contribute to an information sheet titled ‘Massage and Cancer: an introduction to the benefits of touch’. **This is the most significant document released by any major cancer institution in Australia in relation to massage therapy and cancer.** The full impact is yet to be felt and we gained valuable insights as Gayle presented her work to the folk in Ballina, Coffs Harbour, Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne.

Following the first workshop at Quest for Life, in early March, Gayle and I travelled to northern NSW and Gayle spoke to mixed groups comprising tactile therapists, folk with a history of cancer, oncology staff and family carers. Ballina and Coffs Harbour Cancer Council support group facilitators hosted the event and I felt so proud of our Aussie welcome, the beautiful towns and the splendid sea.

Gayle was an athlete in her youth and a swimmer of some stature however she had never swam in the open sea; in warm water or experienced 'surf'. Between the meetings we had a weekend at Brooms Head and I don't want to tell you too much about the place as it is a very well kept secret. Surrounded by national parks and state forests, Brooms Head is spectacular in its timeless simplicity. Few travellers experience this unique environment and from the looks of things Aussies don't either!

At the National Museum in Sydney Gayle presented to a 'full house' and what a delight it was to share this event with the wonderful people from the NSWCC.

The NSW tour opened the way for a change in attitude towards massaging people with cancer and highlighted the need for specialist training in this field.

As the massage industry matured, therapists are now told that special care is required for people with cancer or a history of cancer. In the past fear of litigation influenced massage schools and created the 'no massage' myth. Therapists have been taught that if people have cancer or a history of cancer they are not suitable clients to massage.

Gayle has written two text books on this subject and Massage Australia, a respected professional journey, has been publishing my articles and Gayle's for over 10 years.

Quest for Life have had massage therapists on programs since the beginning and now has two oncology trained massage therapists on every cancer program as well as supporting my work since 2001.

From 2005 Quest for Life has offered several courses each year of the only accredited training program in Australia that teaches massage and Bowen therapist how to work with people who are currently experiencing cancer or who have a history of cancer. That program is called Massage Cancer and More (MC&M).

Quest for Life is the leader in this field in Australia.

The lecture tour with Gayle defined the training needed to improve the knowledge base as well as the need to build the training program into a qualification that will prepare therapist to work alongside medical staff in hospitals around Australia.

Quest for Life has scheduled five 'Oncology Massage 1' programs beginning in May which will include Gayle's work and my own leading into 'Oncology Massage 2' which will replace MC&M and be very similar in content. 'Oncology Massage 3 and 4' will focus on hospital based massage training to complete a 12 month program.

I notice that there is continuing change in the medical community. I imagine that this is just the beginning and I feel excited to be a small part of it and there is no turning back.

The research from specialist cancer hospitals in America shows statistically significant benefits from massage for folk facing the challenges of cancer and those living with cancer, Gayle MacDonald has written the text books and Quest for Life, the NSWCC and, among others, the 48 therapists who undertook specialised training in March 2008, are ready to meet the challenge.

Let me take the opportunity to thank the staff at NSWCC for their professional help, particularly Vivienne O'Callaghan, Shirley Hoffman and Kendra Sundquist for their vision and support in underwriting this unique and much needed project. I look forward to working with them in the future.

Petrea and the program team at Quest for Life have been fabulous and Wendy in our shop has kept me company as we have worried and waited for Gayle's books to arrive! They are here we just need to get them distributed!

Gayle expressed her gratitude for the splendid teaching venues, a residential experience for her students and the opportunity to see a little of Australia.

Until the next edition of Connections...heaps of hugs Eleanor

PS. The Australian Association of Massage Therapist (AAMT) sponsored Gayle and to I teach in Melbourne and the one-day workshop was very well attended providing a networking opportunity with Eastern Palliative Care and The Austin Hospital. Tricia Hughes, CEO AAMT, continues to be a strong supporter of Oncology Massage. Penny Neuendorf at Canberra Institute of Technology hosted an information night for her staff and teachers from massage schools in the region.