Finding the Words

For her honours degree, Elise Sloan completed a qualitative study at Cabrini called ‘Finding the words: issues parents face when communicating a parental cancer diagnosis to their children’. She chose the project because of the opportunity to make a difference.

Supported by a generous donation from benefactor Ms Simone Sanger-Szalmuk and supervised by the Cabrini Monash Psycho-oncology Unit staff, Elise interviewed ten parents affected by a cancer diagnosis as patient or partner (who had children aged between six and 12 years) individually. Among the participants recruited from Cabrini’s Brighton and Malvern hospitals, there was a range of diagnoses and prognoses.

Elise says she was struck by their strength, openness and honesty with their children. “I asked them about their experience of telling their children,” she said. “They appear not to have had adequate help or advice from health professionals and we now realise how difficult these conversations are for parents who do not know how to go about it and lacked the necessary support and reassurance.”

As for the words themselves, Elise made the following observations from listening to the parents’ experiences:

- It is important to use the word ‘cancer’ to avoid misinterpretation about the illness
- Be truthful but positive
- Recognise that children have negative ideas about cancer
- Explain that each cancer is different and give positive examples of people who have survived the disease
- Include children in treatment in a way that is appropriate for their age to demystify it

The project was a fantastic learning experience, according to Elise. “I was able to conduct primary research about a sensitive topic and I experienced the complete research process,” she said. “Although it was challenging, most of the people I spoke to were positive and had hope for the future.”

Elise’s own future looks bright: her goal is to become a psychologist working in clinical practice. The study is ongoing within the Cabrini Monash Psycho-oncology Unit; the second stage is to develop a resource that parents can use to help them tell their children about their cancer diagnosis and treatment.