

CNSA Member of the Moment – Kate Wakelin



Where do you work?

I am the NET Patient Support Nurse with the Unicorn Foundation. Unicorn Foundation work with people affected by neuroendocrine tumours (NETs), an uncommon cancer.

How did you get into Cancer Nursing?

I was working in HIV Palliative Care in the early 90s, when triple antiretroviral therapies were discovered, meaning our gorgeous patients suddenly went from preparing to die, to looking for jobs! Our unit emptied almost overnight and our beds started to fill with cancer patients, waiting for hospice placement. I found a whole new world, with so much to learn about. I was fascinated by the diversity between cancer types, treatments, and most importantly, the experiences of my patients who were navigating this world and teaching me so much. Since then I have worked in Radiotherapy, Day Oncology, Community Palliative Care, Clinical Trials and Qualitative Research, and Cancer Information and Support.

What do you love most about your job?

My role gives me the unique opportunity to work alongside people throughout their NET cancer experience, from diagnosis, treatment, survivorship through to palliative care. Because NETs are uncommon, many health professionals know very little about their management, so my patients are very thirsty for both information and support. It is tremendously rewarding to see people progress from being completely bewildered (and often terrified), to gaining the confidence to support others and advocate for their needs.

I love the autonomy and diversity of my role, running a national helpline, coordinating a network of Support Groups across Australia, running webinars, working closely with our Consumer Advisory Group in advocacy, and connecting health professionals with a community of expertise via our Health Professionals Network. I am also very grateful for the opportunities to travel, both within Australia and overseas. I am constantly learning, meeting amazing people, and feeling like I make a difference in people's lives.

What are some of the challenges you face?

It can be like being a child in a lolly shop, with so many things that could be done! So my biggest challenge is keeping things contained, to avoid biting off more than I can chew.

What are the skills you need for your role?

In my role I draw on every ounce of clinical experience and education I have had! A role such as this demands not only a high level of understanding of the technicalities of the cancer and its management, but also communication skills, problem solving and creativity, and being able to see outside the square. You need to be a person who loves to learn, and most importantly, someone who genuinely likes people!

What is the best piece of advice you would give to a junior nurse who wants to gain the skills to work in a similar role?

Take every opportunity to learn, especially from your patients, who are the best teachers of all!