

Running Head: RURAL FAMILIES' FUNCTIONING FOLLOWING A CANCER
DIAGNOSIS

**“We’re completely back to normal, but I’d say it’s a new normal”: A qualitative
exploration of adapted functioning in rural families following a parental cancer diagnosis**

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*This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment
of the Honours Degree of Bachelor of Psychology*

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The University of Adelaide
October 2016

Word Count: 11,780

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Abstract

The Resiliency Model of Family Adjustment and Adaptation (RMFAA) proposes that the diagnosis of cancer constitutes a life crisis for not only the patient, but the family unit as a whole. For rural families, a cancer diagnosis may be particularly debilitating due to the pile up of financial, practical and emotional stressors, all of which stem from difficulties in accessing vital medical and psychosocial care. A body of literature has investigated these issues using an individualistic framework, however, a holistic, family-oriented approach has not been applied to rural families affected by cancer. Therefore, in the current study, the RMFAA was utilised to guide a qualitative exploration into rural families' functioning throughout the course of a cancer diagnosis. Ten families, wherein a parent of dependent children had received a cancer diagnosis, participated in focus groups. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, and four core themes were identified. "Key challenges to coping in a rural cancer context" encompassed three sub-themes: "frequent travel", "increased work/financial demands", and "familial separation". Similarly, "protective internal factors" comprised three sub-themes: "children's restricted comprehension of a cancer diagnosis and the need to adapt communication accordingly", "strong and stable family relationships are highly valued by rural families", and "the value of problem solving in promoting normality". "Protective external factors" comprised two sub-themes: "offers of community support can be perceived as both helpful and unhelpful" and "support services are frequently accessed and typically appreciated". "Not all consequences of a cancer diagnosis are negative" was the final theme to emerge from the data. The findings suggested that rural families' ability to access external resources was moderated by the strength of their internal protective factors; resulting in significant practical implications pertaining to the development of interventions that accommodate the specific cancer support needs of rural families.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University, and, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no materials previously published except where due reference is made.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

Eleanor Garrard

October, 2016

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to the people who played a pivotal role in the execution of this study, whether it be through: practical knowledge, academic guidance and/or words of encouragement. Thank you to the rural doctors who facilitated contact with eligible participants, the recruitment would not have been half as successful without your engagement in this process. Thank you to the Wells family who housed and fed me on several occasions during data collection, your hospitality and company were appreciated immensely! And of course, I am indebted to my two supervisors, Professor Carlene Wilson and Dr Kate Fennell. I feel privileged to have had an eight month collaborative, working relationship with the two of you, and this thesis is ultimately a product of your extremely timely and honest feedback, coupled with your faith in what I have endeavoured to achieve.

Next, I must thank my family, who despite lacking in expert knowledge on this topic, have made substantial contributions through love, food, and many relaxing nights in front of the footy and/or Netflix. A special thanks must go to 'Mutti', who has drafted every section of this thesis with immense enthusiasm and tireless patience. At this point, I would also like to acknowledge my grandfather, Martin Clarke O'Dea (otherwise known as 'Grumps'), who passed away in March this year. Grumps had a profound influence in shaping who I am today, and I know how proud he would have been of this accomplishment. This thesis is dedicated to him.

Finally, a huge thanks must go to all of the rural families who participated in the study; all of whom had a powerful story to tell, and were brave enough to do so.

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