

**THURSDAY GIRLS  
EVALUATION REPORT**

*'It's been a lifeline'*

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It was a great honour to be asked to undertake this evaluation and we are indebted to Sue Fisher and Marg Haywood who initially approached us to become involved and to all the members of the Thursday Girls Group and the Thursday Girls Partners Group who supported the evaluation and participated with generosity and openness.

This is a group embedded in courage and wisdom and extraordinary acts of kindness.

We hope that we have honoured your story.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Deborah Absler and Dr Gaye Mitchell are Practice, Research and Evaluation Consultants and Honorary Research Fellows with the Department of Social Work, at The University of Melbourne.

Deborah has a mental health practice, research and policy background working extensively with vulnerable children and families, in social work tertiary education and with indigenous communities. Her practice focuses on undertaking research and program evaluations with not for profit and government organisations with a particular interest engaging vulnerable young people and families. She also provides training and professional development across a number of sectors.

Gaye Mitchell has undertaken research and evaluation in family support, family preservation, Out-of-Home care and homelessness services. Her main research focus has been families experiencing intergenerational patterns of poverty, exclusion, disadvantage, and involvement in the child protection and out-of-home care systems.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Thursday Girls group is a facilitated, weekly support group for women living with advanced breast cancer. The group grew out of a program initially funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council from 1997-2003 as part of a worldwide trial to test whether patients who participate in supportive-expressive groups survive longer and have a better quality of life. The findings from the research were positive. Following the trial, the facilitators secured external philanthropic funding and continued running the group until the end of 2016, when the philanthropic funding ceased.

Since 2017 the group has been facilitated on a volunteer basis by two social workers with extensive experience in the field of palliative care. They are reimbursed for some expenses, and have, over the past three years, been paid a small honorarium on two occasions. The group meets in an outer Eastern suburb, with members from all over Melbourne. Referrals are predominantly from members and healthcare providers. Since 2017, the Thursday Girls group has expanded to include a range of activities: regular informal lunches after each Thursday group; a social lunch for all members (whether they attend the Thursday group or not) during each school holidays (also

attended by facilitators); a WhatsApp group; informal social and supportive contact between members between group meetings including visits when a member is unwell; special events (e.g. a Christmas lunch); and participation in the committee and fund-raising activities. The facilitators also regularly visit unwell members and maintain phone contact with any member needing or requesting it and are members of the WhatsApp group. In May 2019 a facilitated, monthly partners' support group commenced. In the short period since the partners have been meeting, they have established considerable social contact outside group meetings.

"Thursday Girls" here refers to both the facilitated groups and all the expanded related activities, while "Thursday Girls group" will refer to the weekly facilitated group meeting. Since 2017, Thursday Girls has been established as a legal entity, registered with the Australian Charities and Not-For-Profits Commission, a website has been developed and a committee including group members has been established to oversee the group's administration and organisation.

In the context of these changes the Thursday Girls committee commissioned an external evaluation. The evaluation used an action research participatory evaluation approach and was conducted between August and December 2019.

The evaluation method used a combination of ethical qualitative methods. Data was gathered from existing documentation, focus groups and interviews with more than half of the women members of Thursday Girls, men attending the Partners Group, and several meetings with the facilitators.

Thursday Girls had 24 members during the period of the evaluation. Three members died during the period, and two members joined towards the end of the evaluation. The group was a diverse one, across age, cancer type and occupation.

Some women had been involved for a number of years and 10 women had been involved for two or less years.

Like the women, the men involved in the Partners Group were of varying ages, and from varying walks of life. Most of their wives were well-established members of the Thursday Girls Group.

## Findings

The evaluation found that:

1. Thursday Girls provided effective and highly valued support to the women and their families. The group meetings were critical as the initial means of connection, but most women were involved in more than one activity and a number in different combinations of activities. A number remained strongly connected to the Thursday Girls but no longer attended the Thursday group meeting either due to ill health or for other reasons. Not attending the Thursday group meeting did not imply a decreased attachment or connection to the group.
2. The partners' group also provided effective support.

3. Both groups provide opportunity to meet others living with similar challenges and threats; consistency in the midst of uncertainty; ongoing support and compassion; and connection and belonging from the time of diagnosis throughout ongoing stages of living and dying. Thursday Girls group provides a venue where members share and learn about the everyday and acute challenges of living with cancer, explore opportunities to become more informed, educated and empowered about their illness and how to interact with health professionals.
4. The groups provided opportunity for members to develop informal and strong friendships and social groups, providing support to each other outside the formal group process. It provided the women an opportunity to develop new skills and expand existing skills. Both groups provided a safe haven for members and partners to travel together during periods of extreme sadness and celebration when members have died.
5. The Thursday Girls Group has become a community; caring and supporting and empowering members, partners, family members and their broader communities. It is an important and inspiring resource.
6. The strength and a main contribution to the effectiveness of the Thursday Girls was the reciprocal support and care of members for each other, and thus
7. The Thursday Girls is best conceptualised as a mutual aid group
8. The Thursday Girls has expanded in a dynamic and organic way in response to needs and initiatives of members, and that the nine areas of expansion have increased the quantity and quality of support available to members and their families.
9. The partners' group has provided significant and effective support to all participants, including during the bereavement experienced by one member.
10. The role of the facilitators has been central to the success and effectiveness of the Thursday Girls and in enabling its development and maintenance as a mutual aid support group. The type of facilitation required in this context is embodied by the current team who bring an invaluable mix of expertise, respect, highly relevant professional and personal qualities. Their commitment, compassion and understanding are exemplary. Their respect for the features of the mutual aid nature of the group is central to its success.

The Evaluation made recommendations for the future development and sustainability of the Thursday Girls.

#### Recommendations IN SUMMARY FORM

Detailed recommendations are provided at the end of the evaluation report. In summary, the recommendations are that:

- Thursday Girls, with all components, should continue, with its character as a mutual aid group fully recognised and supported.
- At least one additional group needs to be established to
  - Maintain a workable-sized group and ensure sufficient time for sharing and provision of support which the women identify as centrally important
  - Maintain the open-door policy fully supported by all members
- Careful consideration be given to the processes involved in establishing the additional group to ensure a mix and diversity of members, including a mix of new and existing members in each group.
- Members, with facilitators, regularly review the balance within group processes between: educational and factual input; discussion of feelings and issues; functions of welcome, assessment and screening of new members; numbers of new members entering the group at any one time; and the place of meditation within the group.
- The vital role of the facilitators in underpinning the success of the groups is acknowledged and that clarity be provided to all members about levels of reimbursements and honorarium payments.
- In view of the considerable time commitment required of the facilitator role additional facilitator(s) may need to be recruited. Key knowledge and skills of facilitators are provided in the detailed recommendations (see particularly, Recommendations xiii) and options for alternative levels of payment are discussed in the conclusion to the Report).
- In the context of expansion and growth of Thursday Girls, and the increasing strain this has placed on some members, the activities of funding and fundraising be separated. This is an important structural recommendation and greater detail and functions of the two elements, and their organisation and interrelationship, is provided at Recommendation xv).
- Consideration be given to a voluntary contribution from members from both the women's and partners groups.

## CONCLUSION

The Thursday Girls is an important and exceptional group which embodies the meaning and essence of a self-help, mutual aid group. The accomplishments of the Thursday Girls are considerable. It includes two highly skilled and visionary facilitators who walk alongside a remarkable group of women as they live with their illness in dignity and embrace life and death in its complexity and joy. It was an honour to share time with them and capture their story.

In the words of one of the female members - *'it is a great group - I am so glad and blessed that I have found it'* and from one of the Partners: *'I just want to say what an important organisation this is.'*

If you would like to see the whole Report, please email [contact@thursdaygirls.org](mailto:contact@thursdaygirls.org)