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SURVIVOR

Life on the other side of breast cancer.

Being diagnosed with breast cancer would seem unlucky in most people's eyes, but Sandra Bailey believes she is one lucky lady. The mother of six visited her GP for a minor health complaint and while there he suggested it may be time for her first mammogram. Sandra was 48 years old and had been putting off the test until she turned 50 – mistakenly believing it wasn't covered by Medicare until then.

The doctor said there may be a three to four month waiting list so Sandra rang the clinic that Monday afternoon to make an appointment, only to find there had been a cancellation for 8.30am the following day. They found a lump and by that Friday she was having a biopsy to see if it was cancerous.

"It didn't enter my head that it would be positive – it wouldn't happen to me," Sandra said.

"They recommend taking your husband with you to the results consultation but he wasn't well so I was there by myself when they told me I had cancer.

"They were expecting me to break down but I'm a practical person. I just said 'okay, what next?'"

Sandra was put on the waiting list for a lumpectomy (where the lump is surgically removed) which took three weeks.

"In that time it had grown from 5mm to 3.5cms," Sandra said.

"And they didn't get it all as the doctor didn't expect it to be that big."

They suggested another lumpectomy but Sandra made the decision to go straight to mastectomy.

"It was very little pain; the drain was the worst thing," she said.

"I had it for about a week but once that was out it was okay... I felt alright."

Sandra then began her three-weekly chemotherapy cycles which made her "very sick".

"The first week I could hardly even move, the pain was so awful," she said.

"The second week I felt like I'd been hit by a truck; by the third week I was starting to feel better, then it was time for another treatment," she laughed.

To add to Sandra's woes, her husband, Phillip, had battled depression after complications from a knee operation left him unable to work. With his wife's cancer diagnosis he sank deeper and required hospitalisation.

"My husband was sick at the same time but I didn't have time to dwell on it," Sandra said.

Sandra and Phillip's youngest child, Jonathan, has Down's Syndrome, and a heart condition, and with both parents unwell the community rallied behind the family.

"We've got family and church support," Sandra said.

"Our network came over and did meals and helped out, and parents at the special school made meals for us and put them in the freezer.

"Phil's brother came up from Melbourne for a couple of weeks and my sister came up from Adelaide for a couple of weeks – and she's a nurse.

"We also had two days respite care for Jonathan when I was in hospital."

The Cindy Mackenzie Breast Cancer