

Kylie: tough battle

By Janelle Miles

BRISBANE — As Kylie Minogue sang at the Sydney Olympics' closing ceremony, another young woman had just begun her journey with breast cancer.

Since Minogue performed *On a Night Like This* in a sexy outfit of pink sequins at Homebush stadium, Meredith Campbell has had a large part of her breast removed, lost her hair twice because of chemotherapy and gone through menopause.

All before the age of 40.

With Minogue this week embarking on her own battle with breast cancer, 38-year-old Ms Campbell had a simple message for the pop diva: "Many young women have walked the same path. You're not alone. There's challenges ahead, but there's also great medical support."

Only about one in 20 of the 12,000 or so Australian women diagnosed with breast cancer each year are aged between 35 and 39.

Although breast cancer is a difficult diagnosis to handle at any age, for younger women the emotional distress is particularly acute.

They're at the height of their sexuality and many are thinking about having a family.

Apart from the obvious questions about survival, young breast cancer sufferers have to deal with surgical scars, the possibility of losing their hair during chemotherapy and, sometimes, early menopause.

"It's a complete shock to your system," Ms Campbell recalled of her diagnosis at 33.

"I was fit. I went to the gym three times a week. I sailed on the weekends and it was the last thing I ever expected to hear at that age.

"When you're first diagnosed, your whole thought is just surviving treatment."

Then thoughts can turn to issues of body image, relationships and fertility.



Kylie Minogue

"In my case, I had a six-year-old son when I was diagnosed, so as a young mother facing the fact that you might not live to see your son grow up is a hugely difficult thing," Ms Campbell said.

"For young women who haven't had a family yet, in many cases chemotherapy can send you into premature menopause. Really, there's not enough awareness of what the impact of that is going to be.

"And if you're not in a relationship, the whole issue of dating after having had breast cancer, that's a big challenge.

"Sexuality and fertility, those areas really are huge issues. Some women go through hell."

Once a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, treatment can take different paths depending on the type and size of the cancer as well as how aggressive it is.

Younger women often have larger, more aggressive tumours.

Even the size of a woman's breast can play a role in whether the tumour is removed by lumpectomy or mastectomy — which involves taking off the whole breast.

Breast cancer surgeon Chris Pyke, of Brisbane's Mater Hospital, said a mastectomy may be performed if the cancer was large compared to the size of the breast.

Minogue has been diagnosed with early breast cancer, which means the cancer is either confined solely to the breast or in the breast and the lymph nodes.

Dr Pyke said if the cancer was larger than 10mm in diameter, patients would have surgery, then chemotherapy, followed by radiation treatment.

"For women in their thirties, around 20 p.c will become menopausal due to the chemotherapy so you would warn them about that and they can either have their eggs or embryos frozen," the University of Queensland senior lecturer said.

"That's normally done after the surgery but before the chemotherapy."

The position of the tumour in the breast can have an impact on how a woman looks after her surgery.



"If the lump's in the upper inner quadrant, like the cleavage area, quite often you get a bad cosmetic result with an obvious scar, even with a lumpectomy," Dr Pyke said. The nipple is only rarely removed.

Some women may decide to have a breast reconstruction. Others opt to wear a prosthesis.

"I decided not to have a reconstruction. I'd had enough of surgery," Ms Campbell said.

"I do wear a partial prosthesis just because I did lose a fair bit of that breast, and it balances me up . . . and makes me a bit more symmetrical.

"It took me awhile to go and get one, about four years. In some ways, it's hard to go and

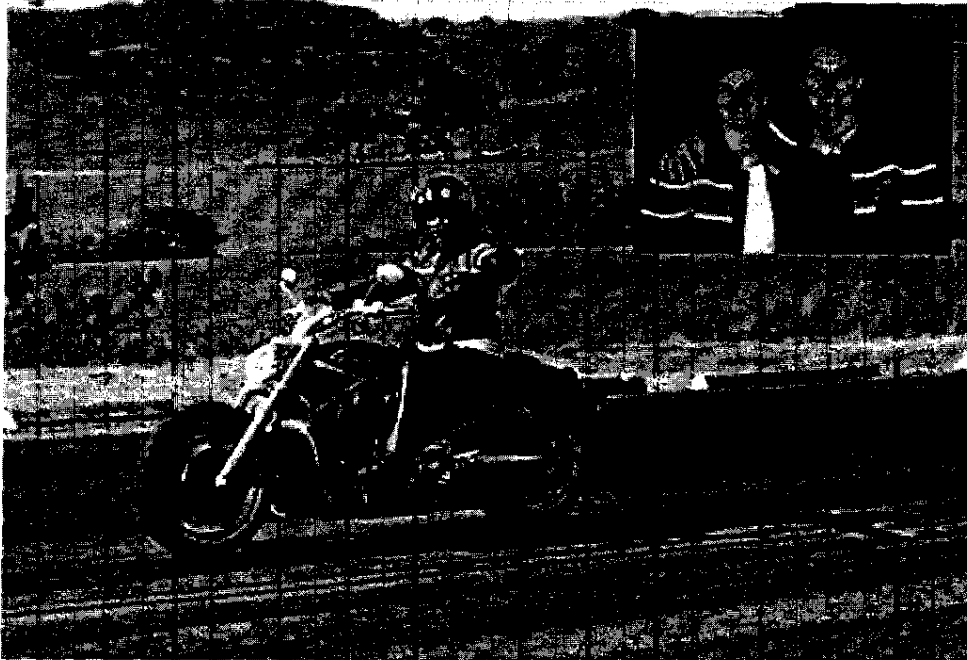
do that because it's a really in-your-face kind of reminder of what you've actually been through.

Ms Campbell is approaching five years after diagnosis which means she'll require only annual checkups to make sure the disease has not returned.

"The biggest danger period for young women is the first two years," she said.

"If you're going to have difficulties with the disease coming back, that's when it's most likely to happen.

Suzanne Steginga, of the Queensland Cancer Fund, said about 84 p.c. of women diagnosed with breast cancer were still doing well five years on.



Breast cancer survivor Meredith Campbell (inset, right) and Megan Dwyer have set up an organisation called Amazon Heart, an adventure program (above) for young women who've had breast cancer.