

Think pink

More young women are being diagnosed with breast cancer,
writes health reporter **Leanne Edmiston**

THE average age of a woman diagnosed with breast cancer is 64 years, but young women aren't immune and incidence has increased in this age group.

In the 10 years from 1986 to 1996, there was a 7 per cent increase in the breast cancer cases for women aged 15-39 years, and in 1999 women under 40 years represented 6 per cent of new diagnoses. That year 89 women younger than 40 died of breast cancer.

These young women often are yet to start families, or have young children, and they have unique concerns about femininity and sexuality, fertility, the long-term impact of treatment and the consequences of their own mortality.

Queensland Cancer Fund community services director Dr Suzanne Steginga said national guidelines were developed for the treatment and support of young women, in recognition of their unique concerns, and the Young Women's Network established in Queensland.

"Psychological stress in young women (with breast cancer) tends to be higher (than in older women)," she said.

"They're at the point where they are building a life, building a family, building a career when they're suddenly faced with a life-threatening illness."

Brisbane mum Carol Fayers was only 34, in the middle of university exams and raising two young energetic boys, Warren and Malcolm, when she found three lumps in her right breast.

"I felt as if I could leap tall buildings in a single bound," Fayers said.

"It was just such a busy time, but for my husband Trevor's insistence I would have put it off and then my GP was adamant I have it checked out further.

"It was a roller-coaster from there — mammogram and ultrasound that same day, saw the surgeon the next day and surgery the day before my 35th birthday (November 5)."

Diagnosed in the middle of Breast Cancer Awareness Week 1997, Fayers had a 23mm primary tumour and two smaller satellite tumours removed from her right breast. The lymph nodes were not affected.

Six months' chemotherapy and radiation treatment followed the lumpectomy, and then two years of daily medication.

Now just a few days shy of her seventh anniversary of being cancer-free, Fayers credits her husband and boys, a strong circle of friends, "stunning" support programs and her practical nature for helping her survive.

"Because my kids were so small and so much was happening, I just wanted to find out what it was, find out if it was malignant and if it was, then just deal with it," she said.

Fayers helped establish the Queensland Cancer Fund's Young Women's Network (13 11 20) and is a telephone support counsellor.

In her experience, the biggest concerns for young breast cancer sufferers were fertility, femininity and the practicalities of coping with treatment.

"How am I going to get through this? Am I going to die? Can anyone tell me I'm not going to die? What am I going to tell my children? How does chemotherapy affect my life? These are the most common concerns," she said.

Harley-Davidson enthusiast Meredith Campbell has taken a different — but

hopefully just as effective — approach to helping young breast cancer survivors.

Campbell was only 33 when she was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to confront the possibility of not being around to see her six-year-old son Dexter grow up.

"I remember sitting in a movie theatre beside my husband John and with Dexter on my lap, watching the opening scenes of *Finding Nemo* where the mother is eaten by a barracuda and the father and son are left behind, bawling my eyes out because that was the worst case scenario coming up in front of me," Campbell said.

After a lumpectomy, removal of lymph nodes, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, she was given a 60 per cent chance of five-year survival.

She celebrated her fifth healthy year this year and has just returned home after finishing an epic charity motorbike ride in America.

Campbell and American friend Megan Dwyer, who also has survived breast cancer, have established an organisation called Amazon Heart to focus on providing peer support for young women like themselves.

They have written a book, plan to trial an on-line peer support system and have just completed the first success trip in an adventure activities program designed to bring young women survivors together.

Five Australians, including Brisbane's Campbell and Jo Parry, 42, raised \$US55,000 by riding Harley-Davidson motorbikes more than 1600km from San Diego to San Francisco on the West Coast of America in a week.

It is hoped the ride will become an annual event. For more information check out www.changinggears.org or www.amazon-heart.com

Pink Ribbon Day is on Monday. Merchandise available from Amcal chemists, Amies jewellers, Millers, Rockmans, 1626, Silhouette and BeMe stores, as well as Queensland Cancer Fund stalls in shopping centres. All funds go towards research, prevention and early detection, and support programs. Phone 1300 656 585. Breast Cancer Awareness Week runs all week



CHARITY riders ... Meredith Campbell and Jo Parry.