

# **Mothers, breast cancer survivorship and physical activity promotion**

Catherine Mackenzie  
BA (Hons)

*Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity  
School of Medicine  
Faculty of Health Sciences  
Flinders University*

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

March 2010



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## Summary

Breast cancer is the most commonly reported cancer in women in Australia, with increasingly high survival rates. Consequently, the health and wellbeing of breast cancer survivors is becoming an important field of cancer survivorship research. Research shows that regular physical activity participation improves important health outcomes for women after a breast cancer diagnosis. In Australia, rising average age of first birth means more women diagnosed with breast cancer in Australia are mothers of dependent children, but little is known about their experience. This thesis explores the experiences and views on physical activity promotion and participation of this significant but scarcely researched group of women.

This thesis adopts a critical and feminist lens to ask: how do Australian women who were mothers of dependent children at the time of their breast cancer diagnosis respond to information about health benefits of regular participation in physical activity? To answer this question, the thesis asks five sub-questions; firstly, from what sources do the women gather information about physical activity and health and how do they feel about the information? Secondly, how do they make decisions about acting to support their health in general and physical activity in particular? Thirdly, in what ways do factors such as socioeconomic status, gender or location influence their views on and participation in physical activity? Fourthly, what would it take to enable this group of women to undertake physical activity at a level that is likely to produce health benefit? And lastly, how can evidence from women who have had a breast cancer diagnosis assist in promoting physical activity to women at a broader population level?

This thesis answers these research questions principally by analysis of 36 in-depth interviews with rural and metropolitan women living in South Australia and Victoria, who were diagnosed with breast cancer while they were mothers of dependent children.

The analysis shows how the women's responses to health promotion

messages were shaped by their embodied experience of their breast cancer journeys in their social contexts. The women responded to health promotion information in ways that suggest that messages based on data from studies of population risk were unhelpful at an individual level. The women's responses to these types of health promotion messages ranged from resistance to cynicism and/or blaming themselves for their breast cancer diagnosis.

Consistent with both feminist and qualitative public health research, the women reported social, structural and individual enablers and constraints to participation in physical activity including level of intimate partner support, their own/partners' paid work, their everyday/everynight child caring responsibilities, their post-treatment pain and fatigue, their level of priority for physical activity participation, and the pleasure they derived from it. Most of the women spoke of knowing about the biological benefits of participation in physical activity for women after having breast cancer treatment (such as maintaining bone mineral density) whether or not they themselves participated.

The thesis supports a theoretical approach to health promotion after breast cancer that includes the concept of embodied expertise in breast cancer which is developed over the breast cancer journey. The thesis concludes that combining feminist and critical research principles is crucial to developing health promotion strategies that attend to gender and embodiment, to enable health promoters to support women's health after a breast cancer diagnosis.

## **Declaration**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

Date:

## **Acknowledgements**

Foremost, my warmest thanks go to the women who so willingly gave up their time to participate in an interview with me, within their already extremely busy lives. Without their participation, this study would not have been possible.

To my supervisors Professor Fran Baum and Dr Christine Putland, I offer my deepest appreciation for their time, support and robust academic guidance over the past four and a half years. In particular, to Fran, I give thanks for her wealth of experience in and knowledge of public health research and practice, her compassion and strong sense of social justice. To Christine, I give thanks for her knowledge of feminist theory, qualitative research practice and focus on the structure and form of this thesis. I am extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to experience such high quality supervision. Thanks also to Associate Professor Maria Zadoroznyj, formerly in the Department of Sociology at Flinders University, in her role as assessor, for her assistance with the theoretical aspects of this thesis, and her support to keep going. To all three, I thank especially for their friendship.

My heartfelt thanks go to the academic and administrative staff and students of the Southgate Institute for Health, Society and Equity, the Department of Public Health and the South Australian Community Health Research Unit, for their practical assistance, for their friendship and for creating a wonderful environment for academic development. To the administrative staff; Helen Scherer, Christina Cockerill, Patricia Lamb, Simeon Sharo, Rebecca Ramm, Trish Clark, Robyne Ridgeway and Chris Re'vell, I give thanks for regularly assisting me with the practical requirements of conducting academic research. To Rama Ramanathan, I give thanks for ensuring my involvement in Southgate Institute activities beyond the PhD, in particular, with the Domestic Violence and Families@Flinders research groups. I especially thank Anne Morris for taking the time to read an earlier draft of this thesis and offering very helpful comments.

My special thanks go to my contemporary PhD students Katy Osborne, Sam Battams, Sara Javanparast and Tim House, with whom, particularly in the early days of the PhD, I shared meetings, lunches and coffees, discussing the PhD process and its highs and lows.

I thank the Flinders University Faculty of Health Sciences for awarding a Seeding Grant which contributed to the cost of professional transcription of the interviews and some rural travel. Special thanks to Patricia Berry from the Faculty of Health Sciences Research Higher Degrees Office and to Pamela Monk from Student Services for their friendly and helpful assistance and for keeping the administrative aspects of the PhD on track.

I give special thanks to the people who variously assisted in the recruitment of women to participate in this study and volunteered their time to take part in an advisory group to this project; Professor Neil Piller (Flinders Medical Centre), Dr Tabitha Healey (Calvary Hospital), Dr Kate Cameron (Cancer Council SA), Christine Hygonnet (Cancer Council SA), Cheryl Wright (Inner Southern Community Health Centre), Philippa Hartney (Breastscreen Bendigo, Victoria), Nicole Kinnear (YWCA Encore Program), Mary Macheras-Magias (YWCA Encore Program), Fran Williams (YWCA Encore Program), Maxine Barker (SA Dragons Abreast), Pru Menzies (Dragons Abreast Australia) and the women who participated in interviews who also took part in the advisory group.

Finally, I offer my deepest gratitude to my family: my partner Colin MacDougall for his unwavering love and support and belief that I could start and complete this PhD; my children Lewys (now 10) and Elliot (now 7); my step-daughter Georgia (now 23); and my mother-in-law Alicia, I give thanks for their understanding, encouragement and love. I give grateful thanks to my parents, Lesley and Maynard Mould, for caring for and thoroughly entertaining my children during school holidays at their farm, enabling me to keep writing over those periods. Lastly, I thank our two dogs, Mason and Afra, budgie Speedo and rabbit Mimi for providing a healthy balance of laughs, love and walks.