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Tele-chemotherapy program starts at Roma

Selected South West cancer patients no longer need to travel to Brisbane or Toowoomba for chemotherapy thanks to the introduction of a new treatment program at Roma Hospital.

South West HHS Nursing Director Workforce and Practice Georgina Jones said some suitable patients now could have their treatment at Roma Hospital using telehealth technology.

Charleville resident Dawn Collier was the first to benefit from the new tele-chemotherapy service when she underwent treatment earlier this month.

“Normally, I would have had to travel all the way to Toowoomba for treatment every three weeks, so being able to have it done here at Roma cuts the travelling time and associated inconvenience dramatically,” Mrs Collier said.

“It’s about a 16 to 17-hour round trip by road to Toowoomba for a 20-minute treatment. But with the Roma service now available, that’s cut my travelling time down to around six hours round trip instead.

“You can’t imagine what a difference that makes.

“The staff at Roma who handled my treatment were so professional and caring. They explained everything to me and I was very well looked after.

“It’s a great service and I think South West residents are lucky to have it.

“I’m also looking forward to when it becomes available in Charleville further down the track. That will be amazing and will really cut down on my travelling.”

Mrs Jones said the tele-chemotherapy program allowed expert nurses at Roma to administer cancer-fighting drugs locally with support available as required over a video link by medical oncologists and chemotherapy nurses at the Toowoomba Hospital.

She said the program was available initially at Roma but would be progressively rolled out across the South West through additional hubs at Charleville and St George hospitals.

A full-time specialised cancer care clinical nurse, who will also oversee any tele-chemotherapy treatments, already has been appointed at St George in anticipation of the roll-out and another is being recruited for Charleville.
Mrs Jones said three chemotherapy treatment chairs now were available at Roma, allowing for up to three patients who had met the criteria for a tele-chemotherapy service to be treated at a time.

Charleville and St George will receive one chair each initially when the program is rolled out there later in the year.

Mrs Jones said cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy generally needed to have treatment either weekly, every second week, or every three weeks, depending on their specific treatment program.

“Having to travel all the way to Toowoomba or Brisbane on that regular a basis can be quite wrenching for anyone and even more so if you have a family, a job, or other such responsibilities,” she said.

“It’s so much easier if you can do it closer to home.”

Mrs Jones said not all cancer patients would be able to use the tele-chemotherapy service.

“The program is ideal for those patients receiving certain low-risk therapies,” she said.

“Other patients requiring more complex therapy will still need to travel to a more specialised cancer care centre outside our health service for their treatment.

“However, for those of our patients who are clinically suitable, the new service will make a very big difference indeed.

“Instead of travelling to Toowoomba or Brisbane on a regular basis for a day or two at a time, patients can go home within a few hours of treatment here at Roma Hospital – and later at Charleville and St George.”

The tele-chemotherapy program is a partnership between the South West HHS and the Darling Downs Hospital and Health Service.

“This is a great example of two neighbouring health services combining their efforts to ensure the delivery of specialised treatment services that would otherwise not have been easy to deliver by our health service alone,” Ms Jones said.

“As well as benefitting patients, extending services such as chemotherapy to regional areas like Roma also helps with staff retention.

“Recruiting and retaining clinical staff in rural areas is much easier if you can offer them the opportunity to learn new skills and an interesting and satisfying work environment.

“It’s a win-win for everyone.”
PHOTO CAPTION:
First tele-chemotherapy treatment at Roma: From left – Clinical Cancer and Palliative Care Nurse Louise Matheson; patient Dawn Collier; McGrath Breast Care Nurse Elizabeth Bowman; Clinical Nurse Melitta O’Donohoe and Roma Telehealth Clinical Nurse Rebecca Crouch.

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