Breast Cancer Network Australia’s ‘Seat at the Table’ program

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Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) is the peak national organisation for Australians personally affected by breast cancer. We empower, inform, represent and link together people whose lives have been affected by breast cancer. BCNA represents more than 73 000 individual members and 308 member groups from across Australia. Eighteen per cent of our members are from rural and remote areas and 31% of our member groups are based in rural and remote areas.

Our ‘Seat at the Table’ program ensures decision makers in the national and state health systems are connected to the experience of consumers—women affected by breast cancer and their families. We invite, train, appoint and support women who have had breast cancer to become BCNA consumer representatives. Our consumer representatives participate on committees and research panels across the country, and internationally, and contribute informed views to benefit women affected by breast cancer.

The program currently has 75 trained consumer representatives, with 18 (24%) of these living in rural and regional areas.

This extensive representation is invaluable in driving change and improvement for rural women. Living in rural and remote Australia can bring additional challenges for women with breast cancer, especially around access to treatment and services. Our rural consumer representatives have the experience and knowledge to navigate an experience of cancer treatment on behalf of women living in rural areas.

BCNA’s Seat at the Table program is an internationally recognised program. BCNA consumer representatives have worked with scientists, researchers, clinicians, health service providers and planners since 2000 to improve the provision of treatment, services and care for those affected by breast cancer.

Some examples of projects rural consumer representatives have recently been involved in include:

- Cancer Australia’s Rural Health Professionals Advisory Network
- providing feedback on a patient experience survey, part of a major surgical/radiotherapy trial (TARGIT) in Western Australia
- Cancer Australia’s Breast Cancer Spaced Education Initiative Working Group

The most powerful way to bring about change is to hear directly from the women who have experienced breast cancer. BCNA’s rural consumer representatives understand the issues important to rural women with breast cancer and can powerfully advocate on their behalf.