

Navigating His Own Script

A father's positive mindset through family tragedy and melanoma

Earlier this year, Jarrod Lill was in Noosa with his three children (ages 9, 13 and 15 years) when he first suspected something wasn't quite right. The Queensland destination had become an annual escape in recent years, where he and the kids enjoyed quality time together, especially since the passing of Jarrod's wife and the children's Mum to cancer in 2019.

It was May 2024, four years on from that devastating loss. "In Noosa, I was going surfing, swimming, running every day, and I started feeling a bit tired," the 52-year-old describes, initially putting it down to the busy combination of running a commercial construction business and solo-Dad life.

But back in Auckland Jarrod noticed a pea-sized lump in his groin, which blew out to golf-ball size after a routine run. He went to his local medical centre and was advised to go straight to a nearby urgent care clinic, where he was then directed on to the hospital's accident and emergency.

Initial suspicions that it was a hernia were quickly discounted by a cancer specialist surgeon and an ultrasound was done. Two days later a call came from the specialist, who was overseas at the time, revealing confronting news for Jarrod.

"She said, I've got some really, really bad news. You've actually got cancer," he recounts.

"At the time I was driving to a big factory where I was running a large meeting. We talked for the duration of my drive out there and she explained that I had six tumours that were all bigger than my thumb.

"And it was pretty advanced. They were stage three. It was melanoma.

"The lymph nodes had been destroyed by cancer and become necrotic and I also had tumours growing outside of the lymph system as well as deep in the groin against the bone in the hip."



Jarrod Lill

"You have to understand it, navigate your script for it. I've always been very, very positive about everything in my life."

A further PET-CT scan was needed to determine the extent of spread of the cancer. Jarrod describes this period of waiting as the most stressful time, where he was focussed simply on the daily basics while doing his best to process what was unfolding.

Thankfully the scan showed no additional significant tumours, and a treatment plan was quickly mapped involving both drugs and surgery. Jarrod says the oncologist's message to him was clear - treatment needed to start the next day, or the outcome wouldn't be good.

Initially he had three cycles of immunotherapy, thankfully covered by his health insurance, and Jarrod responded like a 'textbook patient'.

"They really hoped the Keytruda would

shrink the tumours because they were very deep and very big and wrapped around arteries, and possibly quite difficult to get out.

"After the second cycle I had another scan, and the result was amazing... the tumours had shrunk 40%."

In August Jarrod had surgery which took four hours and involved three surgeons. "They got all the cancer out. They took out all eight lymph nodes in my leg, and eight lymph nodes up into my heart and stomach."

Jarrod's recovery was interrupted by post-surgery infection requiring more time in hospital, but he's now through that and has re-commenced immunotherapy treatment which will continue until May 2025.

"I've had a prognosis now that I'm 90% cured. From what I've gone through, it's as good as it can get," he says.

Throughout the journey Jarrod has been extremely mindful of the impact of his diagnosis on his three children, who'd already experienced losing their Mum to cancer earlier than any child should have to. He says, "My kids are my life, they're so important. We operate together. You have to keep the family going, right?"

Jarrod's melanoma is one of a small percentage of cases where the primary source hasn't been identified, but he knows his years outdoors, unprotected from the sun are the likely cause.

Growing up in the lower South Island and much of his adult working life in

Wellington, Jarrod's spent plenty of time in the sun, with years of recreational outdoor time, an eight-year stint in the police including dive squad time out on the water, transitioning to becoming a builder. He knows, in hindsight, he could have been more vigilant with sunscreen, wearing a hat, clothing and sunglasses, as well as shade, to protect his skin.

Sharing his story Jarrod says, "I hope it helps someone else.

"I was blessed enough to know that something was wrong pretty quickly in my body and went straight away and got it looked at, and everyone who helped did their best job. I couldn't ask for more, right?"



Jarrod's three children

Melanoma Awareness Month a Success

Melanoma New Zealand's recent Melanoma Awareness Month national campaign, created and executed in collaboration with our sun safe sponsor La Roche-Posay, was a huge success.

Throughout October our Nurse Educators travelled the country to nine locations offering free spot checks and melanoma education to the public. A digital and media campaign ran in tandem, helping raise awareness about how to be sun smart, how to check your own skin, and the importance of skin checks with health care professionals, particularly for those at higher risk.

The Melanoma New Zealand x La Roche-Posay pop-ups made it to Auckland, Hamilton, Tauranga, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. Running across four Friday to Sunday weekend stints the events attracted both passers-by and people who'd heard we were coming to town through advertising. The numbers and reach exceeded expectations and goals.

Melanoma Awareness Month has never shone brighter either, with monuments and bridges, including the iconic Auckland Harbour Bridge, lighting up red to mark the month and help raise awareness.

1537 people seen

132 suspicious lesions detected

47 suspected melanomas



Marija stopped by the Melanoma Awareness Month event in Albany, Auckland where she was able to say a heartfelt thank you to our Nurse Educator Jade Castaños-Bosnić (on the left).

"I went to a spot check recently and I'm so glad I did. I think you do a great job for society. Everyone should come and check because you never know what you might find."

Message From Our Chief Executive

It's been a busy few months since our last issue of *Spot News* and a read-through of this edition will bring you up to speed with some of the key things that have been happening.

You might have read the front cover story of Auckland Dad Jarrod Lill's melanoma journey already, and I'd like to thank Jarrod so much for helping others by sharing it. I'm so inspired by his positivity and approach to life, despite facing such difficult circumstances, losing his wife to breast cancer in 2019, and then his own cancer diagnosis this year. In a similar vein, the team and I are very humbled by the strength and courage of Sophie and Michael Gattsche who recently ran an amazing event - the Sam Gattsche Memorial Fundraiser, in memory of Michael's brother on the one-year anniversary of his passing from melanoma. See page 5 to find out how much they raised for Melanoma New Zealand, with the support of the Palmerston North community.

October was Melanoma Awareness Month and I'm hugely proud of the success of our national campaign and want to extend a big thank you to La Roche-Posay for being a terrific campaign partner and making it all possible. My thanks also go to our team of dedicated staff and particularly our Nurse Educators, for putting in the hours on the ground in centres around New Zealand.

To have more than 1500 people, across nine different locations, stop in for a free spot check and a chat about prevention and early detection of skin cancers is a great example of the positive impact we can achieve. With 132 suspicious lesions and 47 suspected melanomas detected through the course of the nationwide drive, I'm confident we've changed the future course of health for a significant number of people in our communities. This, combined with the wider mission of raising awareness nationally through a variety of channels, including the media, will ultimately save lives.

We've been continuing to engage with Pharmac in various ways to share our views and seek urgent clarity about what drugs will be funded, and when. Advocating for melanoma patients is a vital part of our work, and we'll be sure to report back with any helpful updates.

With the groundwork done I'm delighted that the Melanoma New Zealand Counselling Service is now live, and our counsellor Shireen Garrett is delivering counselling sessions online and by phone. It's especially pleasing to be able to extend our patient service offering in this way after a melanoma patient survey highlighted to us that anxiety was the main symptom of the melanoma diagnosis for 60% of respondents.

Another milestone moment is our recent commitment to the first project supported by our newly-created Melanoma New Zealand Research Fund. We are proud to be a co-funder, together with Cancer Research Trust NZ, of a research project that will be undertaken by Dr Andrea Gu starting in September 2025.

While treatments like immunotherapies and targeted therapies have shown clinical success, many patients fail to respond to these treatments because the cancer cells become resistant to

the drugs. This highlights the urgent need for new treatment strategies to overcome drug resistance. Dr Gu will aim to use new gene-editing technologies to identify genes associated with drug resistance in melanoma which can help with the discovery of new drug targets and improve treatment options for melanoma patients.

Dr Gu will spend 18 months at the prestigious Wellcome Sanger Research Institute, near Cambridge in the United Kingdom, then bring back the skills and techniques she acquires to the University of Auckland to complete the fellowship. I look forward to sharing more about Dr Gu's research in due course.

Looking ahead, an important document, titled the 2024 - 2028 Skin Cancer Prevention and Early Detection Strategy, will be made public in early 2025 and it may be of interest to many of you. In an initiative driven by MelNet and funded by Health New Zealand I Te Whatu Ora, a number of skin cancer prevention and early detection experts came together in a working group to contribute, and we're proud to have been part of the group effort.

Finally, I have another thank you message - to our partners, patrons, ambassadors, donors, fundraisers, grant providers and volunteers who have contributed, each in your own way, to our achievements over recent months. In a time of significant challenge for many, good health still tops almost every wish list, and our work to champion melanoma prevention and detection quite simply wouldn't be possible with you.

I wish you all a safe summer and a happy holiday season with your family and friends, and look forward to another impactful year in 2025.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrea".

Andrea Newland
Chief Executive
Melanoma New Zealand

Counselling Service Live

We're really pleased to let you know that Melanoma New Zealand's new counselling service is now live, offering individual sessions with a professional counsellor for free, either online or by phone. Support groups are being established as part of the service too.

Our counsellor, Shireen Garrett, supports anyone affected by melanoma, including individuals, families, whānau and carers facing the challenges of a new diagnosis, ongoing treatments or post treatment. Individuals can book directly on the Melanoma New Zealand website, and we also accept referrals from health professionals.

The support groups will involve monthly online sessions facilitated by Shireen and individuals are asked to register their interest as Melanoma New Zealand works to set these up once a sufficient number of participants has been reached.

To book, refer or register interest go directly to Melanoma New Zealand's Counselling services webpage or go to www.melanoma.org.nz - and see Counselling under 'How we can help you'.



In a survey we conducted of 108 melanoma patients, **60% said they experienced anxiety as a result of their melanoma diagnosis.**

Welcome to Jodie

We welcome Jodie Bakewell-White who joined the Melanoma New Zealand team in October as Communications Manager.

Jodie is a communications and public relations specialist with more than 20 years of practical experience across the sport, non-profit and charity sectors. She brings that experience together with a passion for working in purpose-led organisations, driving awareness initiatives and supporting fundraising campaigns.

In her role Jodie leads all communications functions for Melanoma New Zealand helping raise awareness about prevention and early detection, as well as communicating the impact the organisation makes, and the stories of those with lived experience of melanoma.

If you're interested in sharing your melanoma story to help raise awareness you can email Jodie at jodie.bakewellwhite@melanoma.org.nz



Will You Help Save A Life?



Every donation we receive from you, our wonderful donors, goes towards supporting the urgent work we do at Melanoma New Zealand to help save lives. Tragically, we lose too many of our loved ones to this terrible disease, and yet if caught and treated early, melanoma is nearly always curable.

To try to turn around New Zealand's terrible statistics, we need to fight for better funding, as well as fund research and reach as many people as we can with our life saving messages about the vital importance of both staying safe in the sun and getting regular skin checks.

Your generous support enables us to get the message out into the community. Will you help save a life? No donation is too small, and we are very grateful for any support you can provide.

www.melanoma.org.nz/donate or **phone 0800 463 526**

'Our Time Here Is Limited, And It Matters What We Do'

Sam Gattsche Memorial Fundraiser

Sam Gattsche, a young Palmerston North builder, passed away from melanoma in September 2023 at just 28 years of age. He'd noticed a mole on his back in 2022 and despite Sam trusting his gut and persisting to get it checked, tragically it was later confirmed as melanoma, and went on to claim his life, far too early.

It was especially heartbreaking for Sam's brother Michael, and Michael's wife Sophie, who were motivated to do something that had the power to prevent other lives being lost to melanoma. With huge courage and commitment, the couple organised a fundraiser and melanoma awareness event in Palmerston North which took place one year on from Sam's passing.

Michael spoke on the night; "We had two reasons for wanting to host this event. First up, we wanted to have a big party to celebrate Sam and also, to raise money for a cause that matters.

"He was one of those people who had an electric energy, someone you always wanted to be around. Sam and I were pretty much inseparable all our lives, and even shared a room until we were 21," said Michael, who was also Sam's business partner.

"If this fundraiser can encourage one person to get a spot check, and get their melanoma detected early, we could save a life. And that really does mean something."

More than 230 people gathered, \$20,000 worth of items were donated for a live auction, 33 local businesses chipped in with sponsorship, and friends and family donated cash, illustrating the profound impact and ripple effect of Sam's death across the Palmerston North community.

The generosity shown far exceeded Michael's and Sophie's expectations with a total of \$40,285 raised for Melanoma New Zealand.

"We thought we'd raise about \$15,000 but we managed to raise heaps more than that which is so cool," said Sophie.

"So many people have messaged Mike afterwards saying just how much they were impacted by the event. When Mike did his speech, there was honestly not a dry eye in the room."

Nurse Educator Gill Rolfe, who represented Melanoma New Zealand at the event, said it was a privilege to be part of it and a very humbling experience. Gill's vast experience as a specialist dermatology nurse was put to use and she spoke about the importance of prevention and early detection, and many guests took the opportunity to get a free spot check on the night.

"Like anyone who has known such grief, or lost a loved one too soon, you will know that it changes your perspective on life. You realise that tragedies happen every day, that our time here is limited, and it matters what we do."

Michael Gattsche



Slip



Slop



Slap



Seek



Slide

For more information go to melanoma.org.nz

Gibbs Farm Day Attracts A Crowd

What a day! In late November, Gibbs Farm on the Kaipara Harbour opened the gates to its stunning property with 200 people attending in support of Melanoma New Zealand with a total of \$26,373 raised. We had the spot check van on-site and our Nurse Educator offering free spot checks and education. Huge thank you to everyone who made it along!



Get Spotted Winner

We have a winner!

8-year-old Lucy from Beachlands School in east Auckland was selected by judges as the winning entry in this year's Melanoma New Zealand Get Spotted colouring competition.

The competition garnered a huge number of entries from primary and pre-schools in 13 regions across the country lured by the possibility of securing a fully installed Lidgard Shades shade sail for their outdoor area. With a total of 1669 colouring pages submitted, the volume of interest was terrific for spreading awareness about protecting our tamariki and staff from skin damage.

It did make for a tough decision for the judges though, who took the time to view each and every entry submitted, commenting that there were a significant number that showcased talented colouring skills, as well as some very creative and intelligent answers to our sun smart question.

In the end it was the combination of standout colouring for an 8-year-old, with effective shading and attention to detail, along with a smart answer to our question mentioning a number of ways to help stay safe in the sun, that won the judges over.

Beachlands School wins a fully installed shade sail from Lidgard Shades valued at \$20,000 to help keep their students and staff protected from the sun for years to come.



Thanks to our supporters.







