



Dairne – Lived Experience Advisor for the Disability and Cancer Project



Being diagnosed with breast cancer changed everything for Dairne Kirton.

“I was diagnosed in 2008. By 2010 the cancer had spread significantly, which resulted in a double mastectomy, chemotherapy, and reconstruction.”

It was in the reconstruction phase that things became particularly problematic. Dairne has one arm, her left arm is shortened with her hand consisting of three fingers, this made the surgery more complex.

“Because of my impairment, and unusual shaped breast plate the right breast implant did not sit symmetrical and quickly shifted around and settled under my armpit. The situation remained like this for another two years. My confidence and self-image took a very big hit, and I hid away from life at home during this time.

“It was obvious the surgeon and medical team had not fully considered how my impairment would impact on my reconstructive surgery and the likelihood of any complications due to lack of thorough pre-op checks and awareness of diverse human anatomy.”

Dairne had to fight for the surgery to be corrected. It was an exhausting ordeal while at the same time trying to rebuild her life following the diagnosis and treatments.

“There was very little consideration and support as a disabled person. If I had been listened to respectfully about my impairment, and this had properly been taken into consideration, the surgery would have likely turned out different.

“I tried to get people to listen to me and point out disabled people were not being properly consulted or considered, but I was met with many closed doors.”

After getting the surgery rectified, Dairne started to think about what changes were needed to ensure disabled people who were living with cancer and using the health system had a voice, choice, and better cancer outcomes.

“I was extremely blessed to have two aunts who advocated while I was unwell. It allowed me to focus on my treatment, rest, reconstruction, and recovery while they sorted out any issues to support my wellbeing.

“It is concerning that advocacy for disabled people is still so required within our health systems. Not every disabled person has whānau or friends to support and advocate on their behalf.”

“If you are a disabled person and going through cancer, I truly don’t recommend taking the journey alone. If possible have whānau, friends or an advocate go with you and support at appointments – you really need as much support as possible during treatments.”

When Dairne saw the Disability and Lived Experience role advertised by Te Aho o Te Kahu she decided to apply in the hope she could contribute to improving the health system and the experiences and outcomes for disabled people.

“I did not want to miss the opportunity to share some of my journey and experiences positive and negative. Hoping to create better inclusive, considered and implemented cancer care options for disabled people.

“I am delighted our health system is starting to create equitable health services in consultation with disabled people that include and value us as equal citizens of Aotearoa.”

A lot of time has passed since Dairne was diagnosed. Her life has been changed forever by her experience, however some changes are good.

“I have a healthy work / life balance now. My wellbeing and whānau are of greatest importance to me. I have learnt that I am not my best version of me without them, they are me and I am them.

“I have also learnt that tomorrow is not promised, it’s important to do something that counts today.”