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Title: Interview with Pratika Lal, founder and Chair of charity Treasure Chest Inc

You are a breast cancer survivor. How has breast cancer affected you?

Cancer has changed how I see life but I won't let it define me. I have learnt to appreciate more and I firmly believe that I have twice survived cancer because God had another plan for me, and that was to keep going on the various things I have started and need to finish. Treasure Chest is one of those things I want to leave behind with a sense of achievement, and that we as a bunch of amazing women have started something to improve the lives of many women coming behind us.

I think I am living my life better since I got cancer but it does shake your very being – it made me see who really means something to me. You tend to strip yourself of all the hangers-on and see who really has substance. I've never been one to mince my words however before my diagnosis I had a filter of sorts, now honestly I don't have one anymore and if I've offended people over the last 10-12 years so be it. Maybe, just maybe, what I have said may change how the people I've offended see life.

You realise suddenly that you are in fact breakable and I have never known fear like I have the first time I was diagnosed with cancer, then when I really thought I had nailed the disease it clipped my wings again but I am learning to fly again. Will I be able to stand up and fight another fight if I have to – I bloody well hope so....

How has cancer changed your life? Where were you and where are you now?

Oh my goodness – my life has most certainly changed dramatically. I find it harder to fall into relationships because I fought so hard to live I don't want to take second best (so a person really needs to shake my core) –in anything really. At the time I was getting so comfortable in my skin – I had an amazing job, I was comfortable financially and I was just settling into this amazing life when I got whammied with Breast Cancer (BC) and after a long time getting it together and just settling in it whammied me for the second time. So from this latter experience I conclude I am not meant to just "settle" anymore...

How have your experiences affected your family?

My family have been battling this dreadful disease for a long time. My Mum passed away from breast cancer at age 62. She fought it for 14 years before it took her life. I was next on the block. It was pretty scary for all of us because we remembered how mum suffered. Yes the trauma is the same however the medicine/treatment is better now and when I got BC the second time even the operations were less painful. My second eldest sister followed the pattern then my youngest sister after her. My eldest has since had a full hysterectomy which showed up that she was in early stages of Fallopian Tube cancer. My nieces who have chosen to be tested so far also have the gene....

What did you go through?

Some amazing empowering things and some miracles and some very awful painful things.

How did it change you?

I was scared first then angry then determined. Then I met all these other women who had no support, no loving, financially comfortable family with a fighting spirit like no other and suddenly my diagnosis seemed like nothing in comparison to what they were going through.

I tell you what, my family would not allow me to give up and still won't...

What made the difference for you in dealing with breast cancer and becoming a survivor?

Support, family, love from my friends , financial security.

When did you conceive the idea of Treasure Chest and why?

I used to visit the hospital often, as you do when you have a disease like cancer, and you meet a lot of people going through the same treatment many often less fortunate than myself and more desperate than you ever could believe. I then was asked by good friends John Ahern, Adrienne Sarkozy and Michelle Stamper to attend a fundraiser they were holding for a hairdresser friend of theirs. Ady asked if I could speak at the event and give people some insight into what a woman fears when she is diagnosed with cancer, and how she copes. The result of me talking from a different perspective— apparently made people open their wallets and also cry a lot. It also had the effect of encouraging people to check on their own health rather than prioritise other things.

Initially I was a bit angry at God – I decided there was no such thing as God as why would he chose to give me this diagnosis and want to make a family suffer twice (not knowing there was even more family suffering to come). Just as suddenly I decided I could do better than just be angry and that God did have a purpose for me, so I embraced God and proceeded to set up something that would help a whole lot of women who had less than myself.

In Prof. Mark Ashton's rooms (my reconstructive surgeon) I met a young lady going through the same treatment who was so young that it astounded me. Throughout my journeys I met many young women, visited some in hospitals, talked to them on the phone and the same thoughts always returned as to how long these women were waiting for reconstruction in the public system, how financially strapped they became, how scared they were and how much they needed someone to talk to and get support from, how long the lines were at the clinic and how many more things were missing that someone could in fact help expedite- These occurrences led me to the idea for Treasure Chest.

How did you begin?

Well we started by hosting a few lunches. We gave the money raised to surgeons who would undertake the surgery for public patients in private hospitals which markedly cut the time the women needed to wait, in what was then a low priority area.

We received brilliant support along the way. A bunch of female lawyers from Clayton Utz who attended one of these friends lunches told us that this ad hoc way of building our charity was not only not tax effective, but wouldn't work over the long term. They then offered to set up our charity pro bono and organise all the legal requirements needed.

Helen Williams, our treasurer, was the only one with me at the beginning and then I talked Lisa Barron into helping. Channel 9 always supported us from the very beginning, with Glen Moriarty doing all the Emcee work for our events. Slowly we talked all our wonderful friends into joining in and my surgeon Mark Ashton introduced me to a great Breast surgeon (Prof. Bruce Mann, now our Chief Patron), and I have been lucky ever since.

Any obstacles to getting the charity off the ground?

No because once Clayton Utz came into the frame and with Helen's tenaciousness we got Treasure Chest going. Then Lisa joined the team and the charity rolled on from there. The rest is history.

How has Treasure Chest evolved?

Oh my goodness has it ever evolved. It is now a talked about charity and the beauty of it all is that we have raised nearly a million dollars and we still do not have any paid staff, no overheads, and the most basic and minimal expenses (mainly website and registration costs) to maintain the charity – WE TRY TO ENSURE EVERYTHING WE RAISE IS GIVEN AWAY – now that is what I call a charity. Anyone who donates money to us can safely say their money was put to good use.

What has been your goal for the charity?

To be able to say yes to everything the Shared Breast Service of the Royal Women's and Royal Melbourne Hospitals need to make the dream of having a great aftercare program, an improved treatment program via counselling, after care at your home, saving your hair whilst having chemo, and increasing the number of reconstructions in the public system by supporting a dedicated team of surgeons working to improve this aspect of the treatment. Now I want to create a wellness area within the breast services clinic, and more trained support breast nurses, a tattooist – the list is endless but it grows daily as we realise there are other aspects we have not yet considered.

What difference has the charity made so far?

- We have increased the number of breast reconstruction surgeries available from the public system at Royal Melbourne and Women's Hospitals
 - Tattooing is now available in the hospital – there is no longer a need to visit a tattoo parlour. Now we have our own machine and tattoo trained nurse and we are about to get another on board as the service is constantly full.
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- Scalp cooling machines and caps- these caps not only improve patient comfort, but are considered to reduce blood flow to hair follicles during treatment and reduce the hair loss experienced during chemotherapy
- Bridging support between BreaCan and the Breast services clinic
- Payment for equipment required for BC treatment procedures
- After care support services such as providing counsellors and dedicated counselling rooms

Why did you choose these things to contribute to?

We sought advice from the Breast services clinic, and also from my experiences and the things I found lacking during my treatment

You developed cancer again. What happened and what impact did it have on you and Treasure Chest?

Well I would like to think that the band of strong women who make up our committee could keep going without me, hence the secret plans I am hatching—and the girls still haven't caught on....

When I got cancer the second time all I could think of was please don't kill me as I have so much more to do and I want to watch all the gorgeous children in my family get married, have babies and achieve grand things in their lives. I decided this was not the time to die, pulled myself together and went to battle so at the time even though TC should have been furthest from my mind I did try to distract myself with it.

Did you discover more that Treasure Chest could do? Did it enhance your determination?

Yes I did discover more needs and yes I am determined – very....,

Have you met women who have benefitted from Treasure Chest's donations?

Some I pass in hospital corridors but I don't want them to know we have done these things. When you commit to creating a charity, you watch from afar how the work we do affects people. I have never done this to be recognised or thanked for it as that to me is not charity. I want all women to have the same opportunities as me, feel loved like I was when going thru this hell, and it is hell. I never want any of them to be obligated to me or us as a group.

What have they said?

Some people are so happy they were able to get a tattooed nipple; some tell me they have had their reconstructive surgery faster than they thought it would take; everyone who chose to have breast reconstruction after their originals were taken from them are happy they still have some semblance of their old selves with hair still intact. Me I was completely bald and my hair never really grew back like it used to be. BreaCan and the Women's Hospital are happy they can continue being the bridge for support etc, so yes we are making an impact and that is all I want.

TREASURE CHEST INC.

Supporting the whole person throughout breast cancer reconstruction

MEDIA RELEASE

Who has inspired you to keep going and support so many women?

My mum

How does hearing from the recipients make you feel?

I feel like we have made a difference. See also previous page.

What plans do you have for the charity? Why?

- To keep going
- Get that wellness area incorporated onto the Breast care services,
- Get dedicated rooms for counsellors so instead of being available to patients a few days a week, I would love for amazing counselling professionals to be available to people every day so it feels less like an assembly line of people.
- Availability of more after care packs so a fiercely independent woman can continue to feel independent rather than dependent and a hindrance..

ABOUT PRATIKA LAL

Pratika Lal is founder and chair of charity Treasure Chest Inc.

Born in Fiji Pratika moved to Australia at the age of 15 years. She quit her life in Australia for a short stint to be with her mother in her last years of battling breast cancer. When her mother passed away Pratika returned to Australia and joined the Liquor industry.

She comes from a family of women who have had Breast cancer, ovarian cancer or have the BRACA1 gene. In the last 10 years Pratika has fought breast cancer twice going through 2 mastectomies. She is in the process of undergoing treatment for HER 2+ stage 2 invasive cancer.
