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Fathers of children with cancer: A narrative inquiry

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Clinical Psychology

at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand.

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2015
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Abstract

Receiving a diagnosis of childhood cancer can be a life-changing event for the child and their entire family. Parents of the sick child, in particular, are faced with the weight of responsibility for treatment decisions and caregiving, and often experience significant emotional, financial, social, and physical challenges during the treatment process. Mothers have traditionally been the focus of research in this area, and there is a paucity of in-depth, qualitative studies exploring the experiences of fathers, from their own perspectives.

The current study explores the experiences of fathers of children with cancer in Auckland, New Zealand. Recruitment of participants was carried out with the help of the local Child Cancer Foundation (CCF). Twelve fathers of children diagnosed with cancer within the last five years responded and participated in narrative interviews, in which they were also invited to bring along objects of significance. Data was analysed through a narrative analytic lens and a subsequent focus on roles: the ways in which fathers constructed a sense of self through the different roles embedded in their narratives. This focus on roles led to an exploration of the ways in which different roles of fatherhood and manhood were central to the ways in which participants constructed their experiences of being a father of a child with cancer. An exploration of the overarching role of Cancer Dad provided a framework to look at how this role was manifested through four key ideas: taking control, finding strength, juggling responsibilities, and managing relationships. Within the idea of taking control, the roles of Decision Maker, Active Advocate, and Practical Policeman are explored. In relation to finding strength, the roles of Emotional Rock and Lone Wolf are examined, and in regards to juggling responsibilities, the roles of Breadwinner and Caregiver are discussed. Finally, within the idea of managing relationships, fathers’ constructions of the roles of Father, Husband, and Family Man are explored.

This study is important in its use of roles as a means of understanding fathers’ experiences of their child’s cancer, and its inclusion of objects and recognition of their significance as narrative devices which can enrich the research process. However, perhaps the most important contribution is to the advancement of some understanding of how fathers understand their place throughout the challenges of their child’s cancer. Finally, this study also provides practical ideas for change, with the aim that support organisations and health professionals may provide more effective support services for fathers of children with cancer.
Acknowledgements

First, I wish to thank the fathers who participated in this research. Thank you for entrusting your stories to me, and for sharing about what it means to be a father and a man when faced with the crisis of cancer. Your openness and courage was inspiring and made this research a reality.

Secondly I wish to thank my supervisors, Prof. Kerry Chamberlain and Dr. Angela McNaught. Thank you for your wisdom, support, and encouragement throughout my doctoral study, and for being a great team in supplying both the big picture and a detailed perspective. Your input has been invaluable.

I also wish to thank Child Cancer Foundation for encouraging me in my research, helping with recruitment, and expressing an interest in applying the results of this study. The work you do with families of children with cancer is incredible.

A special thank you to my family for their continued support, especially Anthony. Thank you for being my encourager, my sounding board, my faithful supporter, and for adding fun and adventure to my life. I love and appreciate you more than I can say. Thanks also to the rest of my editing team: Miriam, Yvette, and Alana.

Finally, I wish to thank the Shirtcliffe Fellowship and Massey University for providing me with financial support. Thank you so much for your generous provision, it has made a world of difference to the time and effort I was able to dedicate to this project.
Table of Contents

Abstract ...................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements....................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents ......................................................................................................... v
List of Figures ............................................................................................................. viii

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................. 1
  Introduction to the Thesis .................................................................................. 1
  Childhood Cancer ............................................................................................. 4
  Childhood Cancer and the Family ................................................................. 9
    Siblings’ experiences of childhood cancer ................................................. 11
    Parents’ experiences of childhood cancer ............................................. 13
    Mothers’ experiences of childhood cancer ........................................... 16
    Fathers’ experiences of childhood cancer ............................................ 18
    Fatherhood and masculinity ................................................................. 21
  Summary and Focus of the Current Study ....................................................... 23

Chapter 2: Methodology and Method .......................................................................... 24
  Theoretical Framework: Social Constructionism .............................................. 24
  Methodology: Narrative Inquiry ........................................................................ 25
    What are narratives? ............................................................................ 25
    Narrative interviews ............................................................................. 27
    Narrative analysis ................................................................................ 27
    Use of objects in narrative analysis ...................................................... 30
    Issues of reliability and validity .......................................................... 32
    Reflexivity ............................................................................................ 33
    Ethical considerations ......................................................................... 34
Chapter Six: Cancer Dad and Managing Relationships ............................................. 108

Managing Relationships ................................................................................ 108
Father ................................................................................................ 108
Husband ............................................................................................ 117
Family Man ........................................................................................ 121
Summary ............................................................................................... 124

Chapter Seven: Conclusions .................................................................................... 126

Summary of Findings .................................................................................... 126
Theoretical Significance ................................................................................ 128
Ideas for Change ....................................................................................... 131
Limitations and Considerations for Future Research ..................................... 135
Reflections as a Researcher ......................................................................... 136
Concluding Comments .................................................................................. 137

References ............................................................................................................... 139

Appendix A: CCF Cover Letter and Participant Information Sheet ................. 161
Appendix B: Participant Consent Forms ............................................................. 164
Appendix C: Summary of Findings for Participants ........................................... 166
Appendix D: Summary of Findings for Child Cancer Foundation ......................... 170
List of Figures

Figure 1. A diagram showing a visual representation of the structure of my analysis, with Cancer Dad as the central role, surrounded by four key ideas with subsidiary roles...........................................................................................................................................46

Figure 2. A photograph showing the radiation mask used during Andrew’s five year old son Alex’s radiation treatment...........................................................................................................................................56

Figure 3. A photograph showing Jack’s son Matthew’s beads of courage as a symbolic representation of his journey through cancer treatment, and Jack’s journey alongside him...........................................................................................................................................61

Figure 4. A photograph showing Max’s daughter Hillary’s beads of courage, which is a symbolic representation of Hillary’s journey through child cancer, and Max’s journey alongside her. A bead in the form of a face, signifying hair loss, can be seen in the top central region of the photograph ...........................................................................................................................................62

Figure 5. A photograph showing empty containers of oral medication, as an illustration of James’ practical role in managing his daughter Jessica’s medication ...........................................................................................................................................64

Figure 6. A photograph showing a portacath and box of hospital bands belonging to Dan’s daughter Charlotte ...........................................................................................................................................68

Figure 7. A photograph showing James’ daughter Jessica’s beads of courage as a representation of her bravery during injections (represented by black beads). ...........................................................................................................................................77

Figure 8. A photograph showing a poster made for Luke’s son Ryan as a sign of support from his pre-school ...........................................................................................................................................80

Figure 9. A photograph showing a mug signed by David Tua and given to Jack’s son Matthew as a sign of support ...........................................................................................................................................81

Figure 10. A photograph showing a packet of cheese balls and a carton of eggs, the main foods eaten by Dan’s daughter Charlotte during stays in hospital...........................................................................................................................................103

Figure 11. A photograph showing Max’s daughter Hillary’s favourite toy, a polar bear which comforted her during medical procedures ...........................................................................................................................................104

Figure 12. A photograph showing the mask that David’s daughter Rachel wore during radiation treatment ...........................................................................................................................................110

Figure 13. A photograph showing the regimental beret that Jack gave to his son Matthew in recognition of the courage he displayed during his cancer treatment ...... 111