

# ROQ brings cancer treatment close to home in North Queensland

*FAST-GROWING RADIATION ONCOLOGY QUEENSLAND HAS OPENED ITS SECOND REGIONAL CENTRE IN CAIRNS.*



*Left to right: The Cairns Team Caren Tyer, Catherine Di Stasi, Toni Sisson, Laura Hobson, Broden Bishop, Bea Burger, Catherine Kerr and Kenton Thompson*

**M**ark Middleton says that one of the most satisfying aspects of his role as CEO of Radiation Oncology Queensland (ROQ) is the difference that access to radiation therapy close to home makes to the lives of cancer patients.

He says: "Toowoomba to Brisbane is 128 km and almost two hours by road; Cairns is 248 km away from Townsville and 1700 km from Brisbane. Before we opened our centres, patients needing treatment were faced with weeks away from home... plus the accommodation expense and the loss of income."

At 37 years, Middleton has packed a lot of experience into his 15-year career. He graduated from RMIT BAppSc (Medrad) in 1995 and moved to Geelong to do his PDY at the Andrew Love Cancer Centre, Barwon Health, staying on for "four great years working in a great place to train."

In early 2000, with now wife Susan, an early childhood teacher, he headed for Canada and a radiation therapist job at the London Regional Cancer Centre in London Ontario. Twelve months later, the couple moved to London United Kingdom, where he joined the Harley Street Clinic.

The clinic had recently commissioned a Varian Amorphous Silicon Electronic Portal Imaging system and over the following 18 months, Middleton became expert in its use. During his time at the clinic he also established close working relationships that have since seen several Australian RTs being employed there.

"This was the start of a very productive collaboration with Varian," he says. "When I returned to Australia in May 2002, to work at the new Ballarat Austin Radiation Oncology Centre (BAROC), I was already



Debbie Shannon, left, and Alison Salmon Toowoomba RTs



The Toowoomba centre



Mark Middleton



ROQ's Cairns Centre is on the ground floor of the Liz Plummer Cancer Centre

very familiar with BAROC's new system."

"Five years as a member of the innovative BAROC team was a professionally satisfying period of my career. What I learned in Ballarat, along with my MBA, has been very valuable in our start-ups in Toowoomba in 2007 and in June this year in Cairns."

ROQ was established by a group of three Queensland-based radiation oncologists with the objective of offering cancer treatment in regional centres. Its first success came in 2007 when the company was awarded an \$8.8 million tender to provide cancer treatment in Toowoomba at a purpose-built centre in the grounds of St Andrew's Hospital.

Middleton's initial appointment with the

group was as chief radiation therapist at the Toowoomba centre, then project manager, which in turn led to his appointment as CEO and becoming a partner in the business.

The Toowoomba centre commenced treating patients in May 2007 equipped with the first of two Varian linear accelerators, Eclipse treatment planning and ARIA information systems. In response to surging demand, the second Linac was delivered by Varian six months later, a full 12 months ahead of plan.

"We have gradually 'collected up' the patients, many of whom who might have declined treatment if they had to travel to a metropolitan area," Middleton says. "We are

treating 60 to 70 patients every day."

And that's not the end of the development in Toowoomba. A second tender worth \$6.7 million was awarded late last year to double the size of the centre to accommodate a third bunker and Varian machine, and to upgrade one of the existing machines to RapidArc. Building works commenced this month [August 2011] with a target completion date of July 2012.

"The Surat energy basin development is expected to add up to 100,000 jobs in the Toowoomba area in coming years. By expanding now, we are 'future proofing' our capacity to treat the anticipated number of patients needing treatment."

The opportunity to establish ROQ's second centre came about when the group won a Public Private Partnership (PPP) tender in October 2010 to operate a brand new facility at Cairns Base Hospital. After a remarkably short eight-month design-equip process, the centre treated its first patient in the third week of June this year.

The Cairns centre has three bunkers and two Varian machines have been installed; a



Kenton Thompson and Toni Sisson

third will be added when the caseload warrants the investment. Up to 30 patients are being treated daily and Middleton says that the caseload is anticipated to increase as cancer patients discover that they no longer have to face up to the prospect of a lengthy stay in Townsville or Brisbane.

Courtesy of Telstra's fibre optic cable and the ROQ wide area network, the 1700 km that separate Cairns from Toowoomba is invisible to Middleton as he sits in his Toowoomba office. "We run one patient database," he says. "This is essential to facilitate a true multi-disciplinary approach across our sites, in effect we operate a single team across both centres. Achieving this link has been one of the most satisfying challenges of my career."

The electronic workflow is based on Varian's ARIA software with local adaptations to suit ROQ's needs; Middleton presented the ROQ variant at the Varian User Group meeting at ASTRO 2008 in Boston.

Toni Sisson, a long time colleague and teammate of Mark Middleton's, heads the Cairns centre. They met 12 years ago when both were working as RTs at the Harley Street Clinic and she worked at the Toowoomba centre for four years before being promoted to Cairns. Her deputy, Kenton Thompson also worked at the Toowoomba Centre and in London at the Harley Street Clinic.

"We have an outstanding team in Cairns," Middleton says. "We assembled people from Victoria, New South Wales, the United Kingdom and locals working around the country who wanted to come home. These new additions complement our skill mix in Toowoomba. I've been very fortunate to surround myself with quality people, including my deputy Jim Frantzis, Head of Planning Mark Jones and Head of Treatment Debbie Shannon. Our team has embraced technology with IMRT and RapidArc routine at both sites"

"I'm a great believer in developing and mentoring young people. Providing opportunity and seeing my team succeed is one of my core values. I want them to work overseas, see the big picture and come back as well rounded professionals."

He's also a passionate advocate of AIR Fellowship and sits on the Fellowship Panel. He says: "I would love to see more young people go through the Fellowship Programme; it's a long and very difficult process but well worth while personally and professionally in the end." S



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