

Media release 17 November 2011

Visionary Gippsland GP wins national award

A doctor who helped to transform healthcare for mentally ill Australians before changing the way many GPs care for breast and ovarian cancer patients has taken top honours at the HESTA Primary Health Care Awards.

Dr Julie Thompson won the Individual Distinction category of the Awards, which are held in partnership with the Australian General Practice Network (AGPN).

The Warragul doctor has had a vision of better integrated primary health care services for 30 years, contributing to boards and committees at local, state and national levels while also working as a GP.

As a board member and chair of the Australian Divisions of General Practice from 2000 to 2003, Dr Thompson was involved in the implementation of the first Medicare Benefits Schedule items for mental health and education programs that changed the way GPs supported patients with mental illness.

“I am proud of the role I played in mental health reform. It took a systematic approach to the delivery of mental health care through general practice addressing several of the barriers that GPs had identified, particularly access to specialist and allied mental health services and skills based training,” Dr Thompson said.

“GPs no longer felt they were caring for their patients with mental health problems on their own. GPs could open the door to comprehensive care rather than expecting an ill patient to navigate services.

“I think it’s made a huge difference to the way we deal with mental health issues in a primary care setting. GPs feel more comfortable taking on these patients, so it has improved access to mental health care.”

Living in regional Victoria influenced Dr Thompson’s perspective and achievements. She was a key contributor to the development of after hours health services following the closure of the Moe Hospital in the 1990s, and she has worked to improve diabetes care throughout the Gippsland region.

“I am passionate about the critical role the GP plays in the health system. To be able to provide quality care we need access to information and education, we need to be supported by a team based in primary care and we need to be able to communicate effectively with the rest of the health system,” Dr Thompson said.

As GP Coordinator for the National Breast Cancer Centre from 2007-2011, Dr Thompson was responsible for developing resources to help GPs improve follow up care for patients with breast cancer, and helped disseminate best practice in early detection and management of breast and ovarian cancer to GPs and the community.

“I had breast cancer 12 years ago. It raised my awareness of how we needed to support and educate GPs because early detection really impacts on women’s survival rates,” Dr Thompson said.

“You can’t expect GPs to be experts without being educated so I got involved in developing and delivering education programs. GPs like to learn from GPs because we know what it’s like to be a generalist and never know what is going to come through the door.”

Her work in cancer care has contributed to improved outcomes for women and a more highly skilled primary care workforce in critical areas of cancer control. She is a member of the Cancer Australia Advisory Council.

“My vision is for everybody in the therapeutic relationship to have access to the same information and take a partnership approach to healthcare,” Dr Thompson said.

“Today 88% of Australian women survive breast cancer. We can do more to ensure they have the highest possible quality of life and this model of care applies to many other chronic diseases.”

Concerned about GPs working in isolation, Dr Thompson recognised access to a multidisciplinary team based in primary care was important for our patients and GPs. She was involved in the early discussions about the enhanced role of general practice nurses, and in developing models and tools to support a more integrated approach to primary care for a range of chronic illnesses.

The HESTA Primary Health Care Award winners were announced at a gala dinner during AGPN's National Forum. Each winner received \$5,000 in an ME Bank Online Savings Account and \$5,000 towards further education or implementation of a program or initiative.

HESTA CEO Anne-Marie Corboy congratulated Dr Thompson and the other category winners.

"The HESTA Primary Health Care Awards recognise frontline health workers helping their communities battle cancer, chronic disease, mental illness and injury. They are an opportunity to celebrate three outstanding contributions and to reflect on the amazing job done every day in primary health," Ms Corboy said.

More information: Michelle Edmunds 0413 120 342

Photographs available on request.