

TO HER DOOR: *Susan Doig provides a mobile breast care fitting service for women in the privacy of their own homes.*

Times photo Marianne Kelly



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Breast caring goes to women's homes

By **MARIANNE KELLY**

AS IF surgery and weeks of radiation or chemotherapy is not devastating enough, breast cancer patients go on to face another hurdle – finding a brassiere that accommodates the crevices the life-saving knife work leaves behind.

Trouble is, says Susan Doig, a specialist breast care fitter, a new bra is the last of their worries.

“When they finish their treatment, initially they just want to live. They don't care what they look like. But six months down the track they feel differently.”

A bra designed to accommodate the new shape and a small prosthesis can make all the difference to the way their clothes look, she says, even for women who have had reconstruction can end up with odd shapes.

“More women are opting for reconstruction, but I'm often seeing the end result.

“Most women think ‘I'm okay’. But there is a shape imbalance. They can say it doesn't matter, and it could be 10 years going without anything,” she says.

“In their mind, they know they're not 100 per cent. The difference may be not all that noticeable. But it's to do with how they feel.

“The most rewarding thing for me is seeing someone down and out about their surgery and then to see them fitted with a prosthetic and a lovely bra.

“They are so elated and excited when they realise ‘I can look like other women’.”

Ms Doig runs Breast Care Essentials from her Maraetai home. But it's a mobile business, covering the greater Auckland region and Northland, and she makes the occasional trip as far south as Invercargill.

She has a solid track record in bra fitting.

At the age of 15 she went to lingerie company Bendon's cutting department where she did a pattern making and design apprenticeship.

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She honed her skills for seven years with a company specialising in breast care products, and has run her own business for 18 months.

She carries a range of prostheses and the German Anita range of bras.

Working in a store environment opened her eyes to the emotional strain women in the early stages of recovering from breast surgery are under.

“They are dealing with fear and walking into a store with other women looking for regular bras is daunting.

“It's not as private as it should be and can be daunting when they have to wait.

“They need rest, peace and quiet and shops are not set up for that.”

Consequently, Ms Doig has opted to fit women in the privacy of their homes or in fitting rooms she has established at some doctors' surgeries in the south-east.

“Many of the women affected are in the 60-70-year-old age group.

“Some don't drive, or they don't like going to town. They may be unwell, some in rest homes or retirement villages, so they need to be peaceful and quiet,” she says.

Bra designs feature soft elastic fabric, comfortable straps, and little pockets to hold the prosthesis.

Sports bras are available with a deeper band and wide padded straps. One design

includes a lace insert creating a camisole effect, to accommodate women who are left with a hollow chest from a full breast cut.

They are priced starting from about \$100.

But Ms Doig worries that in the hubbub of surgery and following treatment, many women fall through the cracks, missing out on information about the Ministry of Health's (MoH) breast prosthesis service payment made for prosthesis and bra purchase.

This omission particularly affects those women who have had partial surgery – a hook wire incision known as a lumpectomy.

“Even when a little lump is taken out, a bra often doesn't sit right,” Ms Doig says.

“They also miss things like the Look Good Feel Better service.”

Ms Doig is a registered provider for the MoH scheme and says women should know the funds are also available for those with congenital effects or the after-effects of burns surgery on their breasts.

She also provides a service for women who suffer from lymphoedema (swelling and fluid retention).

“Women who have had breast surgery are always at risk of lymphoedema developing down the track,” she says.

■ The Breast Prosthesis Service Payment is for people who have undergone a partial or full mastectomy, either unilateral or bilateral, and/or have undergone a lumpectomy, have congenital needs, or have had reconstructive surgery that fails.

The entitlement is \$613.33 (including GST) per side for a four-year period.

Ms Doig can apply for funding on behalf of clients. Phone her on 536-4220 or 027-451-9285, or email breastcare.essentials@gmail.com.

■ Look Good Feel Better is a free service which aims to help restore and enhance the appearance of cancer patients during and after treatment. More information is online at www.lgfb.co.nz.