

## Veterans in Pain: Where the body and mind meet

### Janelle's story

Janelle is a 34 year old woman, recently separated from her long-term partner Donald. Donald and Janelle had been in a relationship since he moved next door to her Brisbane family home when she was 14 years old.

At the age of 15, Janelle developed a plan. She'd always made plans and this was her first long-term one. After finishing school she'd enrol in a nursing course and apply as an undergraduate to join the RAAF. She would put in ten years, leave with great memories and a fully paid up nursing qualification, ready to start a family with Donald.

The plan started well and within four years, she had joined the RAAF and was based in Darwin. Her initial orientation covered general military skills, weapons handling, leadership, and specific military nursing skills such as intubation and ventilation, as well as meeting physical standards.

This was all that Janelle expected, wanted and needed. She had grown up in a military family, relished learning, and loved her sports. Being sporty, Janelle joined the RAAF basketball team, both for the camaraderie and to keep fit.

Her first eight years in the RAAF went fast. Janelle loved the excitement and variety of the role.

She spent six months as part of the primary care team in Afghanistan, where she had vivid memories of the range and challenge of the tasks entrusted to her. *"We saw the outcome of horrifying combat, we treated NATO soldiers, not just ours. We treated Afghan forces who had been involved in fighting. At times we delivered this high quality health care to people who were seriously*

*injured in the back of an aircraft".* Back at the base, amongst other tasks, she ran first aid medical training for new recruits, and provided nursing assistance to the medical officers.

After eight years with the RAAF basketball team they made it to the ADF combined services National Championship finals. An on court stoush during the game ended with Janelle straining the ligaments of her left knee badly. The medical officer on the base initially treated her injury with ice and anti-inflammatory medication. She also attended weekly physio sessions.

Her rehabilitation team indicated that the typical recovery time for this sort of knee injury is 6-8 weeks. After 10 weeks Janelle assured her rehabilitation team that she was fully recovered, despite experiencing niggling twinges in her knee when she was on her feet for extended hours. Janelle felt more comfortable acknowledging that she had a short-term sports injury rather than that she was struggling to keep up with the demands of her chosen career. She retired from the basketball team and didn't complain about her knee to anyone.

She struggled through her final two RAAF years. She missed basketball, the camaraderie and the opportunity to keep fit. The niggle in her knee made for long days. Most nights she'd comfort eat and collapse in bed exhausted.

One day shortly before leaving the RAAF, struggling with a large backpack, she clumsily stumbled trying to get out of a helicopter. She landed on her knees, both of which sustained bruising and subsequent swelling. She was embarrassed and didn't want to draw attention to

either the incident or to her knees. She kept her knees covered, applied ice regularly and took anti-inflammatory meds that she had left over. This time the pain in her knees felt different, it was more of a dull ache than the sharp pain of the original injury. It interrupted her sleep and affected her gait.

After 10 years she left the RAAF, a couple of kilos heavier than when she joined, but with a sense of accomplishment. She was excited to be embarking on the next stage of her plan, which was to secure casual agency nursing work and over the next 12 months, for her to try to get pregnant. At 34 she was worried that *'time was running out'*.

Securing agency nursing shifts was easy, sustaining them was hard. Her left knee was good on some days and not so good other days. On bad days, without much warning, it would lock into place and she was unable to bend it. She hadn't had a good night's sleep for as long as she could remember. She also started to develop back pain. She didn't know a nurse who didn't complain of back pain, but she did plan to ask her GP, *'what's to blame for this back pain, the sports injury or work?'*

Her GP was reluctant to apportion blame but encouraged her to return to physiotherapy, which she did, but it didn't seem to help. It was also expensive, and she and Donald were saving to purchase a home. She regularly took over-the-counter analgesics to cope with the discomfort.

Janelle thought that she and Donald had managed their long distance relationship well, but coming home permanently was different. Donald wasn't his upbeat self and was easily irritated. They nit-picked and had words often. Janelle had been home about six months when Donald announced he was leaving her. He'd re-thought having children, saying he wasn't ready for them yet, and that she'd achieved her dreams, but he hadn't even started on his.

Janelle had sensed something was wrong, but was surprised at how quickly Donald moved out and on. She was resentful and angry at what she perceived to be his impulsiveness which had thwarted her plans.

While in the RAAF she had lost many of her old social connections and now she isn't keen to connect with her RAAF colleagues because she thinks she is *'only half the woman she was when they knew her'*.

Now instead of *'plans of what she will do'* she has *'plans of what she will not do'*. She won't go shopping because the bags are too heavy (instead she shops online), she won't go to physiotherapy because it didn't work and she can't afford it; and she won't sleep without pills and a pillow under her knee.

The daily struggle with the pain is wearing her down. She starts to turn down shifts at work. She knows her gait has changed, she's not sure if it is the pain or habit, but she can't seem to stand upright bearing equal weight on both legs anymore. She has gained a couple more kilos since returning home. The over-the-counter analgesics don't seem to be working so she requests stronger pain meds from the GP and uses them to help her sleep as well. He provides a prescription and a referral to an orthopaedic surgeon.

Her GP rings to tell her that the x-ray results from the orthopaedic surgeon are not indicative for surgery, and asks Janelle to come in to discuss alternatives.

Between that phone call and the appointment, Janelle spends most of her time trying to understand how she ended up on the sofa, overweight, single, unmotivated, eating pain meds like lollies, and without a plan. She wonders if maybe she isn't as resilient as she thought she was, maybe she had peaked already? She can't believe her knee, a mere sprain, could have such an impact. And her back? What's that? It didn't even hurt that much, and yet it seems to have taken over her life. Janelle wonders if her time at the RAAF *'burnt her out'* or whether it was life itself?