



## **NATIONAL GATHERING, ROTORUA Queen's Birthday Weekend 2010**

I just wanted to report back on what a great time we had at our girls' weekend away. Most of us had never met before and, although I've had a fair bit of email contact with the attendees, I think I speak for everyone when I say it was so nice to finally be able to put a face to everybody's name. About half the group gathered at Polynesian Spa for a quick lunch before the Saturday afternoon programme began which was a good opportunity to get to know one another. It was a huge relief to me that everyone seemed really comfortable to talk and laugh together so early on.

We all trickled in to the hotel and at 1pm we were just about all in the conference room, so I said a few words of welcome, including a brief history of the group and then handed over to our first speakers, Dr Megan Ogilvie and Dr Susannah O'Sullivan, two of the only three reproductive endocrinologists in the country. They shared with us their vast knowledge of POF and we certainly made the most of the time we had with them. They presented a very interesting series of topics, allowing for question time at the end of each, which really helped us digest each topic. They covered diagnosis and testing; HRT; fertility issues; bone health; relationships & libido; and androgen replacement. Not everyone present had taken the POF road to early menopause, but we were all dealing with the same aftermath:

- \*hot flushes
- \*night sweats
- \*infertility - whether primary or secondary
- \*relationship difficulties
- \*peer group difficulties
- \*which treatment option is best for me now and in the future?

Regardless of our own personal histories, and despite our obvious differences, we discovered that the things we had in common united us. And that was the theme of the whole weekend. Our differences gave us all a wider understanding of the early menopause experience, while our similarities helped us forge a unique and very special bond that I'm sure we'll all treasure for a long time to come.

After bidding our generous speakers farewell, we headed across the road to Polynesian Spa for some pampering. This was a huge part of the reason I chose Rotorua as our destination and I'm pretty sure everyone had a good time there. I know I really needed my massage even though my brain was still working a million miles an hour making sure I was on top of what was still to come. We all met up again for dinner at the hotel restaurant and had a great time doing more of what girls do best: talk!

Dr. Andrew Shelling from the University of Auckland joined us on Sunday morning and shared with us his scientific knowledge of the basis of POF and of how HRT works within us and did his best to answer our many questions. It was nice to learn a bit more about how ovaries work and the different theories for why humans are the only species that live past the end of the reproductive years. His knowledge added a lot to what we had covered yesterday and helped us to further understand what's going on in our bodies.

Dr. Shelling founded this group while doing research into a genetic cause of POF and gave us a more detailed history of the group that stretches back about 10-12 years. He's always interested in what we're up to and, although he's very pleased we run the group ourselves now, I took great comfort when he said he'll always be around for us. I strongly believe this group needs to exist and while I hope to be here for a long time to come, there may come a time when I need to move on for whatever reason, so it's good to know Andrew can help maintain that continuity with whoever steps up to the plate.

Andrew joined us for lunch, as did our afternoon speaker, Jane Catherine Severn and it was a good chance for everyone to chat more informally.

After we all said goodbye to Andrew - who was obviously very happy to hang out with us girls and in no hurry to leave! - we headed back to the conference room for our final afternoon together. Jane Catherine Severn is a psychotherapist and also calls herself a menstruality educator. She coined the term 'menstruality' when she became aware the English language had no term to describe a woman's lifecycle from the onset of periods through to post-menopause. She divided her session into two parts. The first was about discovering what we'd gained from this journey into premature menopause (which ended up an extremely impressive list including strength, compassion and resilience), while in the second she tried to help us reclaim our lost femininity and reconnect with ourselves. This was the toughest session for me, because although I still sometimes struggle with the medicine and the science, in comparison, I feel I've not really dealt with the emotional side of this journey at all well. I discovered that I still have a lot of pain to deal with going right back to the day of my diagnosis, not to mention all the other complications that have crossed my path since then to do with my relationship and our dreams of starting a family. Through sharing our experiences, we learned that this is something that will be with us all for the rest of our lives and this gave me some relief that I don't have to have all the answers right now. Some questions are unanswered at the moment, but I have confidence that with patience I'll discover the answers for me. As will we all.

To end, I'd like to thank everyone who had anything to do with this weekend, from the sponsors and suppliers, to the speakers and of course our wonderful attendees. Everyone simply wanted to be there and it was truly humbling to be graced with the presence of our professionals who freely give us their time and to watch the group get on so well that by Monday morning no-one wanted to leave. You are all beautiful, courageous women with so much to offer this world. I feel honoured to have been a part of this weekend and I very much look forward to the next one.

Nicole x