

OpenHouse

Supporter newsletter



THE JOY OF SONG

Our Music in Health program

100K FOR CANCER CARE

Go the Distance with Cooper

RESEARCHER SPOTLIGHT

Meet Laura Sunderland

Spring 2025



**Chris O'Brien
Lifehouse**

Cancer care, choose hope



Welcome to OpenHouse

I'm delighted to welcome you to another edition of OpenHouse – a newsletter celebrating the impact of donor support at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse.

This Spring edition brings you just a few of the important initiatives our donors are helping make possible - from crucial research into gynaecological cancer, to a refurbishment of our endoscopy suite.

You'll read about our donor-funded *Music Therapy* program, which brings the joy of singing to patients and their loved ones.

And you'll meet Cooper, a young patient who has overcome incredible challenges and refuses to let his cancer diagnosis define him. This September, Cooper has pledged to cover 100km in our fundraising challenge *Go the Distance* – and his story might inspire you to join him.

I couldn't be more grateful to each and every one of our donors, for their commitment to making a meaningful difference to the lives of our patients, and redefining what's possible in cancer care.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue of OpenHouse, with the knowledge that your generosity is changing lives. Thank you so much for your support.

Professor Michael Boyer AM
CEO, Chris O'Brien Lifehouse

A healthy dose of music

There's no doubt that singing a favourite song can make you feel great.

In fact, research shows that music can have powerful health benefits. That's why, since 2016, the Music Therapy program at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse has grown to a vibrant and vital service that brings joy to the lives of hundreds of patients and loved ones every year. This program is made possible by the support of our generous donors.

Led by Music Therapy Fellow Dr Emma O'Brien OAM, the Music Therapy program uses research and evidence-based musical practice to assist patients' relaxation, reduce stress, relieve pain and discomfort, and improve mood. Guided by our trained Music Therapists Harry and Netta, patients can take part in bedside music therapy and songwriting, learn a musical instrument or record a song in our You Can Centre recording studio.





Music Therapists Harry and Netta in our You Can Centre recording studio.

For our patients, creating music helps bring back a sense of choice and control, and breaks the routine of waiting, worrying and getting treatment with moments of deep engagement and generous encouragement.



“Being able to give this experience to patients and their loved ones is incredibly special and brings a lot of happiness during these difficult periods in peoples’ lives. I’m grateful that I get to do that every day.”

Music Therapist
Harry Thwaites-Tregilgas

Soon, our Music Therapy program will be the focus of a new study for young people receiving cancer treatment, which will look at the emotional and therapeutic benefits of songwriting in cancer care. In the study, patients will co-create and professionally record original songs with our music therapists, and provide detailed feedback to measure changes in their emotional wellbeing.

These findings could shape how we integrate music therapy into cancer care – placing patient voice and emotional wellbeing at the heart of treatment.

We are incredibly grateful to our donor community who help enrich the lives of our patients with the joy of music.

Taking a swing for the future

Alan Balderston first visited Chris O'Brien Lifehouse 8 years ago after being diagnosed with advanced, aggressive prostate cancer. Because his cancer had spread so far, surgery and radiation were no longer options.

Instead, Alan was able to enter a clinical trial of oral medicine. Just three months after taking the medicine, his cancer levels were undetectable. Today, Alan still takes this medicine and enjoys a clean bill of health, which enables him to keep travelling and playing golf.

"As far as I can see, I won the lottery. It's as simple as that," says Alan. "I know how lucky I was to get an extra shot at a normal life."

Alan (pictured with his partner Robyn) has left a gift in his Will to Chris O'Brien Lifehouse, so he can help other people to live well with cancer. "We can't stop cancer, but we can stop the demise of a lifestyle," Alan says.

If Alan's story inspires you to think about your legacy, please consider leaving a gift in your Will to improve the lives of people with cancer.



Chris O'Brien Lifehouse has partnered with Safewill, Australia's leading secure online Will platform. From the 1st – 15th September, you can write a legally-valid online Will for free.



For more information, please contact Lynn Johnson at lynn.johnson@lh.org.au or on 02 8514 0924, scan this QR code.

Your record-breaking kindness

We asked for your help to get one step ahead of cancer, and you showed up in the most extraordinary way.

Thanks to your generosity, we raised an incredible \$600,000 for biomarker research. This is our most successful end of financial year fundraising appeal ever.

This funding has gone straight to work, helping our researchers develop faster, more personalised ways to detect and treat cancer.

Research like this takes time, talent, and serious funding. You've helped make it possible.



"Your generosity means the world to me, my family, and so many others who are facing cancer."

Tim Weale, Chris O'Brien Lifehouse patient

Go the Distance with Cooper

When it comes to challenges, Cooper Starling has experienced more than his fair share this year.

Earlier in the year, after seeing a doctor about a pain in his knee, further scans brought devastating news. Cooper was diagnosed with a rare form of soft tissue cancer, called sarcoma.

With that news came another crushing blow. In order to have the best shot at survival, Cooper would need to have his leg amputated at the knee.

“It was the worst day of my life,” Cooper said. “There were many sleepless nights thinking about what my future would look like. How would I get down on one knee to propose to my girlfriend, or play with my kids? But I’ll take being alive with one leg over the alternative.”

After months of nausea-inducing chemotherapy, Cooper had his operation last April. He threw himself into recovery and was on crutches within 24 hours of surgery.

He also began documenting his experience on Instagram and TikTok and has amassed a large international following. “I want to change the stigma around cancer and show people it’s not a death sentence,” explains Cooper.



Three months post-surgery, Cooper isn’t looking back. With the end of treatment in sight, he’s taken on a new challenge – tackling 100km with his best mate for Go the Distance to raise funds for Chris O’Brien Lifehouse. He hopes as many people as possible will join him.



“I am so thankful that I have Chris O’Brien Lifehouse. I truly don’t know what my time would be like without it. I’ve been given a second chance at life, and I owe it to myself to give back.”



If you’re inspired to join **Go the Distance**, there’s still time to sign up. Walk, run, roll or swim and raise vital funds to ensure patients like Cooper can access the best cancer care possible. **Scan the QR code to find out more.**

Inside our upgraded endoscopy suite

Thanks to the generous support of the Sargents Charitable Foundation, we've upgraded our Endoscopy Service, to help more patients get the answers they need, sooner.

Endoscopy is a procedure that allows doctors to examine the inside of the body using a thin, flexible tube with a camera. In oncology, it's used to screen, exclude, and diagnose cancer, most commonly in the digestive system.



“With the upgrade to our endoscopy suite, we can offer our patients the best technology and expertise available.”

Payal Saxena, Clinical Associate Professor and Head of Gastroenterology



At Chris O'Brien Lifehouse, our endoscopy service is designed for quick patient assessment, often within one to two weeks of referral. This reduces anxiety and, if needed, allows treatment to begin as soon as possible. Our team also performs advanced, minimally invasive procedures that can replace major surgery, improving outcomes and reducing recovery times for patients.

The upgrade includes 24 new scopes, new equipment for endoscopic ultrasound, advanced cleaning and drying cabinets, and state-of-the-art imaging systems. We can now also use AI technology that can detect the earliest signs of cancer, often before they're visible on standard imaging.

We are incredibly grateful to the Sargents Charitable Foundation for helping elevate the care of our patients with cutting-edge technology.



Researcher Spotlight

Dr Laura Sunderland

To recognise Gynaecological Cancer Awareness Month in September, we're shining a spotlight on one of our dedicated gynaecological cancer researchers, Dr Laura Sunderland.

A member of our donor-funded Early Career Research Program, Laura is investigating the barriers patients face when it comes to accessing surgery for ovarian cancer.

"Unfortunately, most patients with ovarian cancer present when the disease is already advanced, which may impact the role of surgery," Laura explains. "This is why we need to review any potential barriers to surgical management for patients with ovarian cancer."

Laura's research focusses especially on the experiences of rural and regional patients, who often face additional challenges when it comes to accessing treatment.

"There are many reasons why patients from rural areas might be less likely to have surgery for ovarian cancer," Laura says. "These may include distance to treatment centres, economic or social barriers or lack of oncological resources."

Laura and her team have been working with the National Gynaecological Oncology Registry to review the outcomes of patients who do not have surgery for advanced ovarian cancer, and the potential contributing reasons.

In doing so, Laura hopes to target and remove barriers to treatment, ensuring equity of access and improved outcomes for all patients with ovarian cancer, no matter where they live.



"Ovarian cancer impacts a considerable number of women around the world with significant morbidity and mortality and no available validated screening tests just yet."

Donor support is absolutely vital for ovarian cancer research, helping to fill the significant funding gap and support new research to help improve patient outcomes."



Meditation as medicine

by Lynsey, patient

When I was diagnosed with incurable, metastatic breast cancer, I threw myself into everything I could physically do—treatment, diet, exercise, supplements. But mentally, I was stuck in a spiral of fear and uncertainty.

That's when A/Prof Judith Lacey, Head of Supportive Care and Integrative Oncology, told me I'd be the perfect candidate for a new meditation course in the LivingRoom at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse, made possible by donor support.

I signed up, still sceptical. I didn't think meditation was going to fix the storm in my head. But from the moment I stepped into that first session, surrounded by others living with advanced cancer, I felt an unspoken sense of calm and understanding. It wasn't a support group, but it turned out to be incredibly healing.

We were taught evidence-based tools to stay grounded. Different types of meditation, ways to recognise and manage overwhelm, and practical strategies to help with daily anxiety.

Research shows that meditation can help people living with cancer feel better day to day. It can ease stress and anxiety, lift your mood, and even help manage pain. Programs like the one I joined are becoming more common, especially helping people with advanced cancer live a normal life while navigating so much uncertainty.

I now meditate daily. It doesn't fix everything, but it gives me a sense of control.

Thanks to your donations, this course will continue for the next three years. If you are receiving care at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse and would like to try the program, get in touch with the LivingRoom on (02) 8514 0038.

Get involved

If you're looking for new ways to make a difference, why not join one of our upcoming events:

Go the Distance

1-30 September

How far can you go to support people with cancer? Walk, run, roll or swim this September to raise funds for patient care at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse. Every km counts in redefining cancer care.

Free Will Week

1-15th September, 14-21 October

Thanks to our partnership with SafeWill, Chris O'Brien Lifehouse supporters have the chance to write a legally valid, online Will for free. For more information on how to write your free Will, visit safewill.com/col

SurFebruary 2026

1-28 February

Get on board for a feelgood summer challenge. Commit to surfing, swimming or stand up paddleboarding every day in February. Go solo or team up with friends to raise funds for the SurFebruary Cancer Research Fund at Chris O'Brien Lifehouse.



Scan the QR code to explore the full list of events.

Chris O'Brien Lifehouse offers compassionate, holistic care alongside world-leading research that redefines the cancer experience. Donations help make this care possible. [Donate today.](#)

