

OPEN LETTER

The Sue Meeuwissen Story (as told by her mother)



Sue Meeuwissen
15/4/62 – 18/7/2000

Active smoking is known to be a proven health hazard. Passive smoking is potentially a health risk to healthy individuals, but it is particularly dangerous for those people with acute and chronic respiratory disorders. Sue Meeuwissen was one such person.

Six years ago my daughter Sue, a beautiful vital young woman, received the gift of life in the shape of a bi-lateral single lung transplant, needed due to the ravages of cystic fibrosis.

Life to Sue was a miracle, and to me her parent, it was an eternal miracle that she had survived the medical prediction of living to 5 years. She was now 32.

Life for Sue was a continual battle. Not only was it a battle against cystic fibrosis, but she, like many others like her, had the added component of asthma.

Sue had to take great care she did not trigger an attack by accidental exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (ETS). Each attack could be life threatening. Accidental exposure, even standing at the ATM with a passer-by smoking caused problems, and it could mean life-threatening episodes of asthma with her lungs bleeding or collapsed. Each episode was devastating.

How difficult it is to avoid being exposed to the drift of smoke from the casual cigarette!

Five months after her transplant she delivered a paper on passive smoking to the World Health and Tobacco Conference in Paris. She had never been overseas before, never been able.

Many people said that she should stop worrying about passive smoking and get on with her life. But to Sue there was a bigger picture than just her and her personal desires. She knew too well what it was like to suffer from the effects of environmental tobacco smoke (ETS).

But she had one personal desire she wished to fulfil. Sue had never been to a nightclub, so on her return from Paris she went with friends to the Hilton Hotel in Sydney. She had to leave due to an asthma attack brought on by ETS and took her case to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. In *Francey and Meeuwissen v. Hilton Hotel* Commissioner Graham Innes ruled against the Hilton in a landmark case citing that the barrier Sue faced by being unable to stay in a smoky environment was "no different" from a physical barrier that might stop a person in a wheelchair from entering a public venue.

Again an accidental exposure to ETS when she visited an office where someone was smoking with 'no smoking' signs clearly visible brought admittance to a hospital Emergency Department. She spent a number of days in hospital. An opportunistic infection added to her condition and she was once again on the slippery slide.

Due to failing kidneys she was unable to have a re-transplantation. She continued to devote her time to creating public awareness of the problems of ETS and knowing that her days were indeed numbered she doubled her efforts. For her birthday in April she received a laptop computer which enabled her to work more comfortably whilst bedridden.

At the time of her death in July 2000 Sue was working on a new awareness campaign 'Where People Smoke Matters'. **Sue saw the problems of passive smoking as a violation of human rights.** Her strong belief was that smoking should only take place between consenting adults. Sue was particularly concerned for the vulnerability of children.

At the 2000 Carols by Candlelight Concert held in Jells Park in the City of Monash, Victoria, Sue's message was read to the audience of 16,000 and appeared in the program. It was heartening to find that no one was seen smoking in the audience and that children could breathe easy.

Any anti-smoking campaigns should contain information on the dangers of passive smoking, especially in the case of young children and those with respiratory conditions.

Where people smoke matters - we sometimes wonder who cares?

It is imperative that all governments do not shirk from comprehensive ETS legislation and that the rights of all people to have a world where one can breathe air free of tobacco smoke pollution is upheld.

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31 January 2001