

Hopsice 25 years a wonderful achievement

An important era in Taranaki's history ended this month, and will – as eras are wont – be replaced by a one that looks just as promising. Kevin Nielsen is retiring as chief executive of Hospice Taranaki and his place is being taken by Paul Lamb.

The occasion was marked last Saturday by a dinner at Devon Lodge Hotel attended by dozens of the people who contributed to Kevin's extraordinary success at the helm of what in some ways is an organisation few of us relish the thought of engaging with - although chances are high that engage we will.

Those people were mostly women, a special band who over the past 25 years provided care to thousands in their last moments of life, or contributed voluntary service to ensure that hospice thrives.

As I found when I talked to many of them to produce a book celebrating that quarter century, there isn't the slightest sense of self consciousness about what they do. They focus on the miracle that is life and how it can be lived positively till it's no longer there. There's no ban on the "d" word - it just doesn't figure large in the psyche of the organisation, which is of course the psyche of those who belong to it.

The book was a fascinating endeavour because it turned out the hospice history is anything but serene. There were some monumental rows in the leadup to building today's fine facility near the base hospital in Westown in 2003, and it became obvious as research unfolded that it was Kevin Nielsen's steady hand from 2002 that ensured it happened at all.

That led to something of a dilemma when we embarked on the project last year. Other hospice books we looked at tended to be glossy celebrations with high public relations utility, and while that remained a focus for the Taranaki one, Kevin and I were determined not to neglect the narrative behind how the hospice came about.

There was also Nielsen's modesty. He's not a man to trumpet his achievements, so it was up to me to discover the depth and breadth of them. It meant a lot of interviewing and a heap of sifting through old files. I started with a cardboard box of clippings, posters and scrapbooks, and a most useful history of the early days of the hospice foundation written by Frank Lowry.

There were lucky discoveries. The first treasurer, Michael Chong, had kept the accounts book for a precursor group called Friends of Taranaki Hospitals, which began with fundraisers to buy TVs and easy chairs for hospital lounges and morphed into the hospice foundation in the early 90s. There it was in the book he'd preserved – a note showing the financial birth of what became the foundation in 1992.

It turns out Taranaki Base Hospital has its own library, a small room in one of the buildings, tended part-time by a diligent custodian, who was able to find reports of crucial meetings recording the bureaucratic machinations of early failed attempts to set up a hospice back in the 80s.

There's one last thing worth mentioning. Like most journos of my era, I had no training in how properly to caress words out of the monster Remington machines we started on, so to this day I hammer keyboards until the "a" and the "e" markings vanish, and spend countless minutes correcting my high error rate.

Eerily, there was one miss-key that persisted throughout production of 100,000 words for the book – the spelling of "hospice". Without exception, it appeared as "hispoce", "hopsice" or some other iteration (even when I typed this column). I sometimes wonder whether my mother (who was cared for by Pat Bodger, Heather Koch, Ian Smiley, Louise Forsyth, Nuala Marshall and others in Te Rangimarie in 2002) was reminding me I shouldn't think for a moment I know it all.

Incidentally, you can buy the book for \$20 from Hospice Taranaki, and every cent goes to the hospice.

FOOTNOTE: Thanks to emeritus professor of local research Ron Lambert for his feedback on my recent column about Struan Park (Lower Vogelstown). The name appeared in an official report on oil prospects, and Ron advises that in 1907 an oil well was indeed drilled down 1385 feet from what is now Vogelstown Park. It found oil traces - but I don't imagine current occupants New Plymouth Old Boys Rugby Club would be that keen on another attempt.