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Health

'Men try to be a bit macho': cancer fighter's plea to get body changes checked

MS By Michelle Smith
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1 Comment

Chris Geljon has been fighting neuroendocrine cancer with the support of his wife Kate Mackie and their children Elliot, 7, and Zarah, 3. Picture by Lachlan Bence

For Chris Geljon, the mental aspect of his fight against a rare cancer has been harder than dealing with the physical effects.

The Creswick father of two realises it's not that way for everyone but he's determined to shed light on the mental health of patients, particularly men, going through cancer and their families.

Mr Geljon said that from a young age, many men are conditioned to "be strong" and "don't cry", which discourages them from opening up about their emotional struggles - a stigma that can be even more harmful when battling life-threatening illness.

His cancer journey began in October 2023 when he was diagnosed with a [neuroendocrine tumour](#) in his pancreas.

It was luck that a junior doctor at [Ballarat Base Hospital](#) decided to order a PET scan after bouts of abdominal pain, diarrhoea and chronic fatigue landed Mr Geljon in the emergency department several times.

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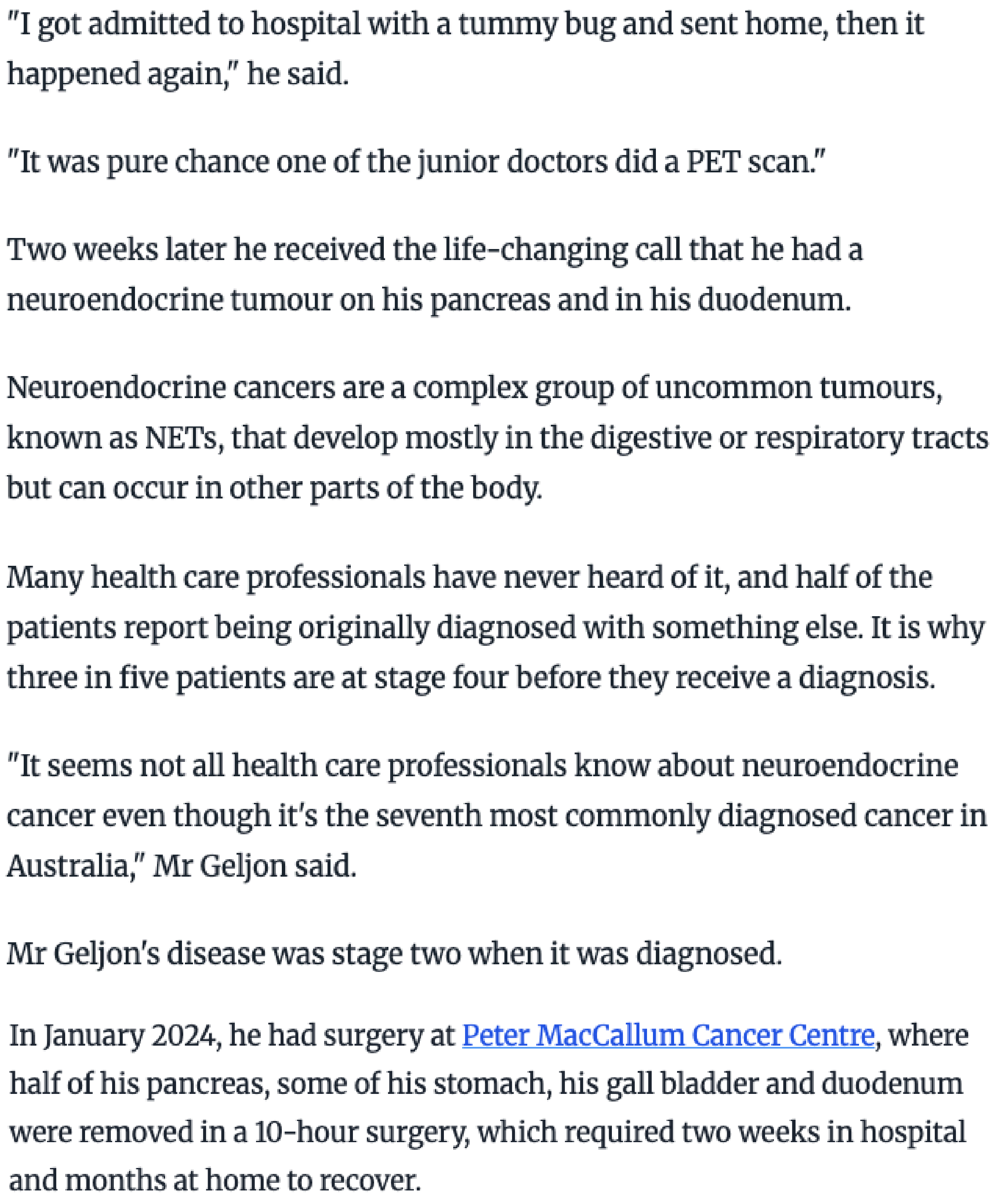


"I got admitted to hospital with a tummy bug and sent home, then it happened again," he said.

"It was pure chance one of the junior doctors did a PET scan."

Two weeks later he received the life-changing call that he had a neuroendocrine tumour on his pancreas and in his duodenum.

Neuroendocrine cancers are a complex group of uncommon tumours, known as NETs, that develop mostly in the digestive or respiratory tracts but can occur in other parts of the body.

Many health care professionals have never heard of it, and half of the patients report being originally diagnosed with something else. It is why three in five patients are at stage four before they receive a diagnosis.

"It seems not all health care professionals know about neuroendocrine cancer even though it's the seventh most commonly diagnosed cancer in Australia," Mr Geljon said.

Mr Geljon's disease was stage two when it was diagnosed.

In January 2024, he had surgery at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, where half of his pancreas, some of his stomach, his gall bladder and duodenum were removed in a 10-hour surgery, which required two weeks in hospital and months at home to recover.

Katie Mackie and Chris Geljon with their children Zarah, 3, and Elliot, 7. Picture by Lachlan Bence

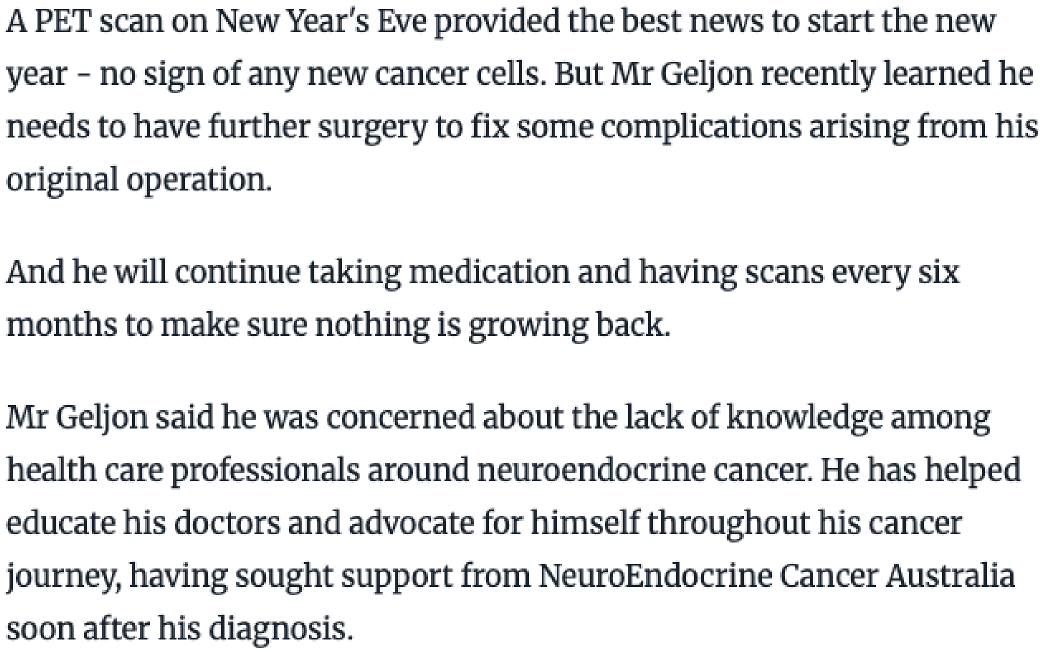
"It's been pretty tough and mentally it's been a struggle to get back into daily life with a wife and young kids," he said.

"It took a long time to be able to eat again. Food has changed, I had abdominal pain, vomiting, all sorts of issues and it took months and months to get back to normal. I've lost a lot of weight, strength and get fatigued ... it's about adapting to a new normal.

"It was hard on (the family) and hard on me. I felt a lot of guilt that I was incapacitated for so long. The kids wanted to play and I didn't have the strength and mentally it was a really tough time."

While daughter Zarah, 3, is too young to understand what her dad has been going through, son Elliot, 7, has realised what has been happening, which has been difficult for Mr Geljon and wife Katie to confront.

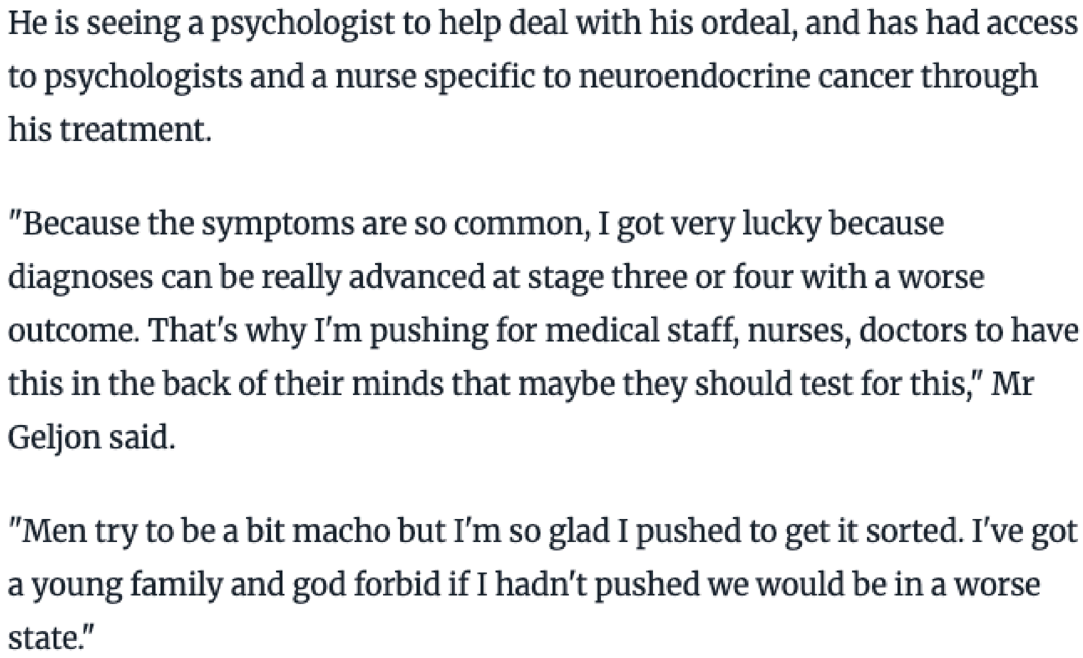
Mr Geljon said his wife had had to pick up a lot of the load while he had been sick, which had added to his mental stress.



A PET scan on New Year's Eve provided the best news to start the new year – no sign of any new cancer cells. But Mr Geljon recently learned he needs to have further surgery to fix some complications arising from his original operation.

And he will continue taking medication and having scans every six months to make sure nothing is growing back.

Mr Geljon said he was concerned about the lack of knowledge among health care professionals around neuroendocrine cancer. He has helped educate his doctors and advocate for himself throughout his cancer journey, having sought support from NeuroEndocrine Cancer Australia soon after his diagnosis.



He is seeing a psychologist to help deal with his ordeal, and has had access to psychologists and a nurse specific to neuroendocrine cancer through his treatment.

"Because the symptoms are so common, I got very lucky because diagnoses can be really advanced at stage three or four with a worse outcome. That's why I'm pushing for medical staff, nurses, doctors to have this in the back of their minds that maybe they should test for this," Mr Geljon said.

"Men try to be a bit macho but I'm so glad I pushed to get it sorted. I've got a young family and god forbid if I hadn't pushed we would be in a worse state."