

## Norfolk Island Rescue

Recently, on 29th Sept 2008, my mother and her husband came to stay for a week. Mum is a tetraplegic as the result of an accident three years ago, so while it's wonderful to have her come, it's quite hard work as someone in a wheelchair has extra needs. So I basically put life on hold that week so we could enjoy our time, planning to pick up on things once she had left.

At the same time Mum was coming here, my Great Aunt (my mother's mother's sister) was heading to Norfolk Island for a week's holiday with a tour group. Aunt, as she has always been known in the family, is 85 years old, but still spry. She has had some health issues the last few years, but was finally feeling much better and decided that as she had not had a holiday in 8 years, she would join her friend on this little jaunt to a South Pacific island for some shopping and fun. They flew there on a Sunday, and were due to fly back on the following Sunday.

On the Thursday Aunt had a small asthma attack (not unusual) and went to the hospital for treatment. She was given medication and then returned to her hotel. On Saturday night she started to feel unwell, but decided not to tell anyone as she REALLY wanted to get home the next day. That night she started coughing up blood and continued to do so all night.

The next morning (Sunday), when the tour leader came for her to head to the airport, she must have been in a state of semicollapse, though that's not how she remembers it. She remembers someone asking "can you walk" and before she could respond, she was hoisted onto a couple of rough planks and carried down four flights of outside stairs by 4 strong young men, then loaded into an ambulance and whisked off to hospital.

On Sunday night, when my Mum got home from visiting us, she had a call from the Norfolk Island hospital to tell her Aunt had been admitted and was critically ill. She was diagnosed with asthma, pneumonia, congestive heart failure, and also was still coughing up blood. Despite being on 100% oxygen, her blood oxygen levels were only 86% - that's really BAD! (normal is 98-100%). Mum phoned me to tell me about Aunt and said she would call the hospital again in the morning.

The next day she spoke to Aunt, who could barely whisper, and who said "she felt as if she was dying". Mum called me, saying she didn't know what to do. We wanted

someone to be with Aunt, but Mum would need a caregiver to travel with her, and would be of limited ability to help if she did go. Her caregiver does not have a passport, and neither did I. We spent the day trying to figure out what to do. Aunt was saying not to send anyone (she was really concerned about how hard it would be for Mum), but we didn't want her to be alone. That night I told my sister, who lives in London, the situation, and she told me "One of us should be there, and I can't go, so get on a plane Sis - I'm paying." ☺

Tuesday my husband and I drove to Wellington, 2 hours away, to try and get an urgent passport for me. The office there did it in 2 hours, which is amazing when you consider what is involved (and the fact they kept repeating that they couldn't promise to do it in less than 3 days!). Doing that and making other arrangements took all day.

Wednesday I drove back down to Wellington and got on a plane for Auckland, then switched to a plane for Norfolk. The second plane was running late, then when we were finally on board was delayed further due to it being found to have an expired life raft and having to get another. Finally we got into Norfolk at 11.30pm NZ time, or 10pm Norfolk time. I was met at the airport by the sister and brother in law of the man through whom I had arranged accommodation as he was away in Australia. They provided me with a rental car and showed me to the accommodation. I called the hospital to inform them of my arrival and give them a contact number, then went to bed. Nothing at all is open in the evenings on Norfolk, so I was glad that I had packed some breakfast cereals and other basic foods for the morning!

Thursday I brought a SIM card for my mobile phone so it would work on the island, then headed for the hospital. Aunt was VERY weak. She could not walk and was in constant pain from "cramping" in one leg. This was due to the blood salts being out of balance from all the meds she was on. Norfolk Island hospital is a typical small island hospital, but the (mostly Australian) staff were very dedicated and caring. Aunt got wonderful care - far better than she would have back in Auckland. The nurses told me Aunt had come within a whisker of dying, and while she still looked terrible, she was MUCH better than when she was first brought in. My main role was to help and encourage her, and find things she would eat. Aunt is a very, very slow eater at the best of times. She is very slight, short and petite. They were bringing her these huge plates of stew which she couldn't face, then taking it away before she'd eaten much. So she was feeling empty all the time.

I brought her some tasty treats from the supermarket, then went and found a lovely young chef who owned his own restaurant and arranged for him to make dinners for me to take to Aunt. She said she really wanted some mashed potato, so the chef dug potatoes from his own garden just for her! 😊 Fresh produce is difficult to find on the island, but I brought some luscious strawberries from the butcher for her, and local bananas, which she had been craving, from the bakery. LOL. Anyway, I managed to get her eating a little more.

Most of my days were spent helping her, feeding her, then tucking her up for some sleep, but unfortunately every time I left her to sleep, I'd come back to find she had been kept awake either by the pain in her leg or by the endless deep coughing. On Friday I finally got the doctor to agree to give her some meds to help her sleep - she so desperately needed it! Plus we changed her meds to try and improve her salt balances, and added painkillers for her leg.

On Friday, at Aunt's insistence, I managed to find a little time to be a "tourist" - going out over the reef in the glass-bottom boat, which was fun, as it was something she'd really wanted to do but had missed due to being sick. I also did some driving around the island looking at the sights. Norfolk Island only 13.5 square miles, but takes a surprisingly long time to drive around, in part due to the state of the roads. Cows wander at will all over the island.



There is a lot of fascinating history as the island was settled by convicts from Australia, and also by some of the original mutineers from the Bounty, who first settled on Pitcairn Island then later came to Norfolk when Pitcairn couldn't support them all. I visited the prison ruins and a very interesting museum.



One of the main problems for Aunt was that she was VERY confused, unable to remember things from one minute to the next. Medication is partly responsible, I think, but also the seriousness of her illness has a lot to do with it. Because of this, she completely relied on me to take care of everything, from the location of her passport and money to making arrangements for the trip home, to checking staff were doing what they needed to, to knowing what her meds were etc. It was very frightening for her to feel so out of control, as she's always been very orderly and organized and completely in control of everything. She was soooooo glad I came, and kept saying over and over that I saved her life. She was able to relax a lot more once I was there, knowing she didn't have to arrange everything, which was simply beyond her, or worry about how she was going to get home.

Despite being still very ill, Aunt just wanted to go home, and was determined to be on the following Sunday's flight. (There are flights from Norfolk to Auckland just twice a week - Weds and Sun). The doctor gave her clearance to fly, and so the arrangements were made. Once we reached altitude on the plane, though, she started to have trouble breathing, so I had to put her on 100% oxygen for most of the flight, and arrange Paramedics to meet us at the airport. They were wonderful - came on board and gave her more oxygen, and checked her over. Their suggestion was to take Aunt straight to hospital, but she got very agitated every time some said the H word, and just wanted to go home. So that's where I took her. I tell you though, if you want to get through international customs quickly, take a couple of paramedics in tow! ;-) I had a staff member pushing Aunt's wheelchair, a paramedic carrying an oxygen bottle to which she was attached and another paramedic pushing my baggage trolley. Customs staff were clearing the way and opening special cues/counters/xray machines etc for us. :-) The taxi driver took one look at her and decided she was precious cargo - driving as gently as he could, taking every short cut he knew. :-)

Once I got her home, Aunt was exhausted. My mother and her husband were waiting at the house to meet us and to drop off a walker for Aunt to use to get to the loo etc, and I was able to use Mum's wheelchair to get her into the house from the taxi. The retirement village where she lives have medical staff available to assist, and the duty nurse came to tell me what meds to give etc. We're very grateful for these staff, but honestly, that nurse was the most IRRITATING human being I've had the misfortune of dealing with in a LONG time! LOL. She spoke slowly, and repeated every instruction at least 12 times. Added to which she kept telling us over and over about how "her important patients" were waiting for

her and she really couldn't spare the time etc etc - repeatedly. It got to where I wanted to open the door, push her out, and say "Thanks for coming, but with all those patients waiting, you better get moving"! Finally she left and Aunt told me she was a bureau (relief) nurse who she'd never seen before, and where did she get off talking about all "her" patients?? LOL. I tucked Aunt into bed. The nurse came back with a nebulizer and commode. And more of the repeated slow talking, and telling me how "valuable" commodes were and how hard it was to find a spare one and how this one MUST go back to the correct wing as soon as we'd finished with it etc etc. And then there was her complete mis-information about the meds. She told me not to give one that she didn't recognize - I called the nurses on Norfolk and they told me NOT to stop that one WHATEVER I did! She got other things wrong too. ☹

Well, Aunt refused to use the commode, and worked out how to get to the toilet on her own, holding on to furniture. Only problem was, once she was there she'd forget how to get back again. LOL. So I spent much of the first night escorting her back to bed, and also medicating her or applying the nebulizer as she was coughing so bad she couldn't sleep. That night was hard, not just for the lack of sleep, but because it really struck me the difference. On the island, I'd had some rough days, but at least I could leave her in the care of the staff and go back to the unit where I was staying and get some sleep. Now I was IT.

The following day the doctor came to see Aunt and went over the meds with me, making some adjustments. I unpacked her case and found I needed to wash everything, as she'd been packing it the last night on Norfolk and had splattered everything with blood from all her coughing. So I was busy with medicating, feeding her, and doing laundry.

That evening, Nurse Irritating from the night before came back. In theory to check on Aunt, though she didn't actually look at her, but just asked me how she was. In reality because she wanted the "valuable" commode chair back "if I was SURE we didn't need it". Yeah right. She wanted it! When she arrived, I was just going out the door with armloads of trash for the bins. I put that down, and told her Aunt had not used the commode, and refused to use it. In fact, every time I'd reminded her it was right by her bed she'd say "Oh, I didn't know it was there". I asked Aunt if she wanted it there for one more night, and she said "No dear, I don't need it. I haven't used it and don't want to." So I fetched it from the bedroom, where it was serving to hold a heater up off the floor. I carried it

outside for the nurse. She picked it up, walked a couple of steps, then tipped it more comfortably against her. At which point we discovered Aunt HAD used it - as we splashed down her stockings and into one shoe.

Nurse dropped the commode like it had burned her, and went limping and sloshing back into the house saying "There's wee in my shoe!" I helped her get cleaned up, cleaned the commode, apologised profusely for not double checking, and sent her on her way. I shut the door, looked at Aunt, and cracked up!! Honestly, normally I wouldn't laugh at all, but it couldn't have happened to a better person! Aunt was giggling too. I should have checked the commode, and so should the nurse. Despite the evidence, Aunt is CERTAIN she never used it - but I somehow doubt someone broke into the house just to use the commode beside her bed ;-).

Over the next few days, every now and then Aunt would get a fit of giggles - because she was thinking about "Miss Wees-in-her-shoes". Oh well, when you're living life in the trenches, you've just got to laugh at little things, or you'd cry! ☺

Aunt lives in her own 2 bedroom house, in an independent part of a retirement village. Over the next few days I filled her cupboards and freezer with food, replaced her toilet seat, which had broken, unblocked the kitchen drains, filled her car with oil, petrol and air, ran errands, cashed traveller's cheques, opened a bank account for her closer to home, sorted out bills and mail, met with doctors and nursing staff, arranged care for when I left, and constantly gave Aunt meds, food, water and other such things, along with housework and cooking. I was rather busy!! ☺

Friday night I finally got home, and all day Saturday I felt like I was in a bit of a stupor. Had felt pretty energetic on the trip, despite little sleep, and was so looking forward to my own bed.

But once I went to bed here, my silly old brain started cataloging all the myriads of things I was behind on as it had now been three weeks since I could attend to the normal details of life here. So I got little sleep. The following night I took meds to make sure I slept and the next day I feel a lot better.

Love  
Cynthia

