



Heartbeat Victoria

Heartbeat Happenings Winter 2025



Heartbeat Victoria Council Inc.

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BOARD OF MANAGEMENT

President: Christine Rees

Vice President: Barry Nixon

Secretary: Vivien Williamson

Treasurer: Karen Saccuzzo

Board Members: John Allen; Elaine Gregory;

Professor Andrew Murphy; Kevin Reid;

Professor Rebecca Ritchie; Vanaja Thomas

VISION: Every individual and family affected by heart disease has access to a compassionate community, vital resources and the highest quality of care, enabling them to live empowered heart-healthy lives.

MISSION: To foster an active, compassionate and inclusive peer support network in Victoria for individuals and families affected by all forms of heart disease and heart-related health issues.

Through our community driven groups, we provide emotional support, share information, advocate for better health outcomes and raise funds for cardiac equipment and improved cardiac care.

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A Message from the President

Welcome to winter. Cooler weather and heart conditions are a bad combination, so let's make sure we are ready for the bugs. Let's eat well, rest well and discuss immunisations with our care team. Our

heart health care team will advise us of the most appropriate way to stay well over the winter.

At its March meeting, the Board resolved to increase its membership from 9 to 11 members. This was done with consideration to the workload, health and work commitments of Board members.

At the May meeting, Professor Rebecca Ritchie from Monash University was appointed to the Board (more about her in the Spring edition) and responses to recent advertisements for a further additional member will be considered in the coming months.

Heartbeat Victoria has already developed partnerships with medical researchers to ensure that heart research is patient-based. Most recently, a research assistant has been walking with members of the Ballarat Branch. Nick Kayshap from the Baker Institute has been interviewing members to gain information and insights on life with heart disease. Bendigo Branch has also had a volunteer speaking to Monash University Professor Rebecca Ritchie. These insights can only be gained by talking to members of the cardiac challenged community. If we can effect change through research it will make for a better understanding of the patient's point of view and improve care for all the cardiac community.

It is with sadness that I also inform members that Jeffrey Gregory, long-term Heartbeat Sunraysia member and President, and husband of Board member Elaine, passed away peacefully in Mildura Base Hospital on May 27th.

Christine Rees



Board Buddies

Each branch or affiliate of Heartbeat Victoria has been allocated a 'Board buddy' with whom to relate on Board matters and Branch matters relevant to the Board and Heartbeat Victoria.

Board buddies hope to be able to meet with branches and affiliates in person over the coming months and, in the meantime, can be contacted directly by email.

Their details are as follows:

Ballarat – Andrew Murphy – andrew@heartbeatvictoria.org.au

Bendigo – John Allen – john@heartbeatvictoria.org.au

Goulburn Valley – Vivien Williamson - vivien@heartbeatvictoria.org.au

South Gippsland – Christine Rees – christine@heartbeatvictoria.org.au

Sunraysia – Christine Rees – christine@heartbeatvictoria.org.au

In a Heartbeat



Board members Christine Rees and Vivien Williamson represented Heartbeat Victoria at the February launch of the book 'In a Heartbeat' by author and heart attack survivor Rachel Jayne Cassidy.

'In a Heartbeat' delves into the emotional and physical complexities of dealing with heart disease, sharing real-life, emotionally raw stories that provide insight into the impact of this disease. From survivors to everyday heroes who, by a momentary twist of fate have

saved a life, to the health professionals who work tirelessly behind the scenes to give seriously ill patients a second chance at life.



The book features amazing stories from the people described above, including the former Yellow Wiggle, Greg Page, and Strictly Ballroom star and politician Paul Mercurio.

Further information about the book and where it can be purchased can be found via [this link](#).

New Board Member

At its May meeting the Board was pleased to be able to appoint Professor Rebecca Ritchie as a Board member. Further information about Rebecca can be found on the [Heartbeat Victoria website](#) and will be provided in the Spring edition of Heartbeat Happenings.

Heart Health



A family's heartache: three generations of heart disease

You wouldn't know it just by looking at him, but Jeff O'Neill has been haunted by a heartbreaking family history all his life.

An electrical engineer officer from Brisbane and a loving father of two boys, Jeff has watched in anguish as cardiovascular disease has wreaked havoc on his family for three generations.

"Heart disease is the biggest killer of my family. My grandfather died of a heart attack in his 70s, and my grandmother passed away from a blood clot. Two of my uncles died from heart attacks, one in his 40s and the other in his 50s. My brother has suffered a major heart attack and lives with type 2 diabetes." – Jeff O'Neill.

The list continues with Jeff's father, who battles severe atherosclerosis (a narrowing of the arteries). The condition requires numerous stents to open his arteries and allow blood flow.

Tragically, Jeff has not been spared this devastating family legacy. He faces a high risk of heart attack due to a congenital condition that affects how blood is delivered to his heart.

Jeff's condition was only recently discovered during a routine medical check.

Yet, despite all, he and his family have gone through, Jeff still lives in hope. He donates monthly to the Baker Institute, helping fund the transformative medical research that could hold the key to saving lives: "Without research, we wouldn't have medical advancements, which help save lives and enable each generation to have longer and better lives."

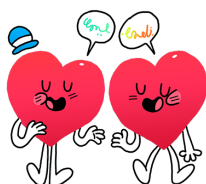
Jeff dreams of a world where his boys can grow up without the shadow of heart disease looming over their lives.

By supporting the Baker Institute, he believes he can help break the cycle of heart disease in his family. And he can help drive the groundbreaking research and medical advancements that could spare countless families the pain and loss his own family has experienced.

Jeff's story is a powerful reminder of why the Baker Institute exists, and the crucial role that supporters like you play in advancing medical research that saves lives and provides hope to future generations.



The above article has been provided by our partner - Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute which, in addition to carrying out medical research focused on the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of diabetes and heart disease, publishes a wide range of informative research-based materials that support heart health.



Heart to Heart

featuring one member's heart health or peer support experience

‘Blue Hat’ and his heart - A life changing experience

(Brian Firth – Heartbeat Ballarat)



For the first 50 years of my life, I was not aware of any problem with the health of my heart. On my 51st birthday I experienced severe bowel pain as I woke. I ended the day in the Intensive Care Unit of Ballarat Base Hospital, the bowel pain being a rare symptom of a heart attack. A few days later, following an angiogram at St Vincents Hospital, I was told by the resident cardiologist that I had three blocked arteries, due to excess cholesterol and would require open-heart by-pass surgery.

After a six-weeks' wait to allow things to settle down, I had a successful operation, followed by a few days' recovery time in the company of other heart patients, some having had their second or third by-pass surgery. I asked the surgeon about typical times between bypass surgeries. "Five years; ten years if you take aspirin daily; however this average is considerably affected by patients who have not made the necessary changes in their life-style, such as smoking, drinking and poor diet." At that point, I resolved to take more care of my health, not only for me, but also for my wife and family. My surgeon also told me that I had old scarring on my heart. That news puzzled me, until I remembered that I had experienced some reasonably serious neck aches (on the left side of my neck) while I was still at primary school. I thought I had ricked my neck. Talk about lucky! I nearly didn't get to write this article.

'Taking care of me' included following advice about medication, diet and exercise, and working cooperatively with my doctor and cardiologist. I changed immediately to a low-cholesterol diet and my wife enjoyed investigating low-cholesterol recipes. I joined the cardiac rehabilitation group at the Ballarat Base Hospital for a few weeks, gaining confidence in my ability to ease back into 'normal' life. Before long I was able to return to work.

All went well until 2011 when my wife and I were touring Croatia and Serbia. I started to struggle a bit when walking, particularly going uphill. Our next planned activity was to visit a friend in Somerset, England. Within 24 hours, I was visiting her doctor, who diagnosed 'atrial fibrillation'. It wasn't long before I was taken to Yeovil Hospital, to determine the appropriate dosage of Warfarin. By now, we had given up on our overseas itinerary. We needed to get back home.

By 2021, it was known that my mitral valve was leaking and the muscles of my left ventricle wall were weak, so that my heart had become a less than effective pump. I was advised to consider undergoing surgery for a valve replacement and/or repair. There was no urgency, but the sooner the better, given my age (82). Associated risk factors of this surgery included not only my age, but also the fact that this was to be a second major heart operation, the number of procedures in my lifetime where significant quantities of anaesthetics were involved and the weakness of my ventricle wall. I decided that, if a surgeon was prepared to operate, then the risk was not too high.

The result of the surgery was a new mitral valve donated by a pig and a repaired tricuspid valve. Unfortunately, there was not much improvement in my heart's performance until I had a pacemaker/defibrillator inserted a couple of years later. Over the years, I also had a number of other non-heart related conditions and operations, including Type 2 diabetes, removal of a bladder tumour, sleep apnoea, cataract surgery for both eyes and, most recently, a cochlear implant.

Heartbeat came to my rescue in more ways than one. Barry Nixon, current Vice-President of Heartbeat Victoria and Secretary of Heartbeat Ballarat, was one of the speakers who was engaged in the cardiac rehabilitation program at St John of God Hospital, Ballarat. I joined the five-week course after my valve surgery in 2021. After Barry's session, I promised him that I would join Heartbeat once I had finished the rehabilitation course.

I have now been with Heartbeat for three and a half years, walking and socialising three times a week. I can identify three significant benefits from being part of Heartbeat.

Firstly, the regular exercise. Prior to this, my exercise had been pretty haphazard, despite the fact that I knew that it was very important for both my heart condition and my diabetes.

Secondly, the social benefit. I have a close-knit and wide extended family and I realised that my social contacts since retirement were almost limited to my family. The diversity of life experiences that exists in the Heartbeat group has given me an important experience and the general friendliness gives me great support. Walking and socialising with other Heartbeat members is an important part of my week. Right from the start, it has been my habit to wear the same beanie each day I walk. It seems to have made an impression, as after a few months, I was presented with a second Heartbeat badge which named me 'Blue Hat'. I use both badges. For the past few months, at coffee time, I have given my name as Blue Hat. In contrast to other members, my coffee gets brought straight to me, without any fuss at all. At that point, I remove my hat and place it on the table, in front of me. Quite a ritual!

The third benefit is that I can monitor my health by noticing how good my walking is. During the middle of last year, I was struggling a bit and reported that to my doctor. Pathology tests showed that I had anaemia and I am now taking iron tablets. Before the end of last year, I reckon I was walking better than I have for decades.

I must acknowledge my appreciation of the work of the many medical professionals that have cared for me over my lifetime and of my fellow Heartbeat members for their friendship, especially Barry, an outstanding leader.

And from Barry Nixon, Secretary Heartbeat Ballarat

Brian Firth, lovingly known as Blue Hat, is a respected member of Heartbeat Ballarat. Mr Firth is a true gentleman, greets all members warmly by name and is truly loved by all at Heartbeat Ballarat.

Brian graduated from cardiac rehabilitation at St John of God Hospital and relishes the opportunity to willingly engage with and encourage new St John of God cardiac rehabilitation patients.

Brian was introduced to Heartbeat volunteers and learned of the peer support, exercise and social connection opportunities offered by Heartbeat Ballarat during cardiac rehabilitation.

Regardless of the weather, Brian arrives three times each week and says it's a walking group and I am going to walk. Rain, snow, or hail, up goes Brian's umbrella and off he walks, always wearing his blue hat.

What's Happening

What's been happening at some of our branches and affiliates lately?

Sunraysia



The Board of Heartbeat Victoria was greatly saddened by the recent passing of Jeffrey Gregory, a long-term member, and President of Heartbeat Sunraysia. Jeff passed away peacefully in Mildura Base Hospital on May 27th, aged 66. Condolences have been extended on behalf of the Board and Heartbeat Victoria to his wife Elaine (Secretary of Heartbeat Sunraysia and a current Board member) and her family at this difficult time.

Jeff was an amazing worker and leader for Heartbeat Victoria and a lovely bloke. You may recall that Jeff's heart story was included in the [Summer 2023 edition of Heartbeat Happenings](#). We will miss you, Jeff.

Jeff's work with Heartbeat Sunraysia's members to mark the 40th anniversary of the branch will continue.

Goulburn Valley

Heart Week

During Heart Week (May 5-11) in Tatura, more than twenty community members gathered for a Heart Health Information Session at Tatura Community House - a partnership between Heartbeat Goulburn Valley and Goulburn Valley Health (GVH).

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is an umbrella term that includes heart and blood vessel diseases (e.g. coronary heart disease), and stroke, is one of Australia's biggest health problems. CVD accounts for one in four of all deaths, claiming the life of one person every 12 minutes.

The session provided presentations that focused on understanding heart disease risk factors, the importance of prevention, and how to take practical steps towards a healthier lifestyle, including the delivery of more Heart Health Checks for eligible people.

Heartbeat Goulburn Valley's Secretary, Robyn Fennell introduced the Branch's peer support activities and emphasised the power of community connection and shared experiences and ongoing health and wellness education for people living with or at risk of heart disease. The benefits of regular walking were also highlighted, with discussion about forming a local walking group in Tatura to cater for different fitness levels and abilities.

Guest speaker Candice Bianchini, Registered Nurse and Health Coach at GVH gave an insightful presentation on health coaching sessions available in Shepparton, including how these can support the management of heart-related risk factors. Candice encouraged attendees to discuss heart health assessments with their GP and make use of free support programs.



L-R: Candice Bianchini, RN Health Coach Goulburn Valley Health; Robyn Fennell, Secretary Heartbeat Goulburn Valley; Suzanne Wallis, RN, Community Health Nurse, Goulburn Valley Health



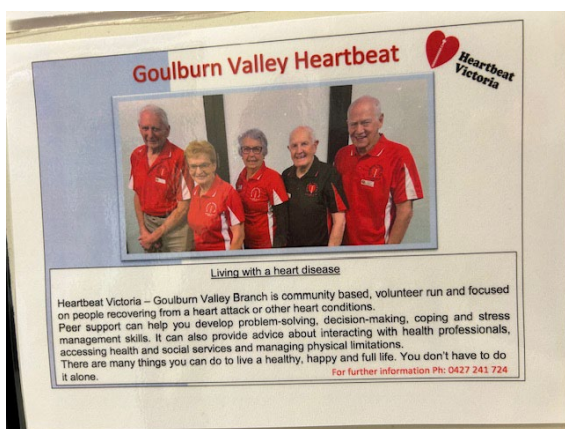
The event concluded with a delicious and informative heart-healthy afternoon tea, giving attendees the chance to connect and share ideas.

Heartbeat in Tatura

We are very excited to share that Heartbeat Goulburn Valley - Tatura, heart peer support, had its first get together on June 2nd, with seven people attending. The group plans to meet monthly on the third Monday of the month at the Tatura Community House, 1.30-300pm, with afternoon tea included.

Weekly walking groups are also currently being planned.

Thankyou to volunteers



Goulburn Valley Health (GVH) hosted a luncheon as part of National Volunteer Week- Connecting Communities 2025, to acknowledge and thank all its volunteers for their significant contributions, helping in many areas of the health service. The event was organised by Goulburn Valley Health Volunteer Coordinator, Karen Saccuzzo and CEO Matt Sharp. Certificates in recognition of years of service were presented, and a letter of thanks and Volunteer Week 2025 badge presented to all GVH volunteers, including Heartbeat Goulburn Valley Cardiac Rehabilitation volunteers.

Bendigo



Donation

Heartbeat Bendigo has recently been able to make a \$10,000 donation to Bendigo Health for the purchase of a medical grade treadmill for the Cardiac Rehabilitation area. Several members attended a thankyou meeting where the treadmill was on display and in use.

“It was lovely to have you all visit yesterday and catch up again. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Bendigo Heartbeat Branch for their generous donation of the top-of-the-line SportsArt Treadmill to our Cardiac Rehabilitation Program. This state-of-the-art equipment has significantly enhanced our ability to provide safe and effective exercise options for our patients.”



Jacquie Dunstan, Cardiac Rehabilitation Coordinator, Bendigo Health

Appreciation

In March, Certificates of Appreciation were also presented to two of Heartbeat Bendigo's long serving members.

Laurie Smith has been a member of Heartbeat Bendigo since 1999. He is an active and long serving Committee member and the go-to person if anything needs to be done – setting up and packing up after meetings (including afternoon tea) and Kay's Fashions events and always jumping in to fill last minute gaps in the Rotary raffle tickets roster.



Eddie Williams has been a member of Heartbeat Bendigo since 2001. He has been the Heartbeat representative at St John of God Hospital Cardiac Rehabilitation since 2006, where he assists in checking attendance and providing information about Heartbeat.

Also, at our March meeting, members were able to meet Bendigo's Board Buddy – John Allen – who spoke to the group about his background, his role on the Board and what the Board has been doing recently, including its new Strategic Plan for Heartbeat Victoria.



Ballarat



Introducing Mark Vorstenbosch, new President - Heartbeat Ballarat

There has been much activity in the Ballarat Branch of Heartbeat. It has been an exciting time for activities, and the growth in our walks and social activities has been extremely heartening. It has been a good balance between our main aims of peer-to-peer support, social connection and practical exercise.

As this is my first contribution to Heartbeat Happenings, I thought I would give a little about myself. I was drawn to the group after seeing the tremendous application to my wife Christine's positive health improvement. It probably makes sense that I care for my wife greatly and as a person with a chronic health history myself, it's clear that support is required for any person who wishes to positively effect their health outcome. I am a Fully Licensed Real Estate Agent and the Manager of Biggin Scott Ballarat. I am known for wearing my hats, which again originally came from my own health issues. I love my sport and have come to love all that Heartbeat Ballarat embodies and particularly the warmth and helpfulness of the group. Heartbeat Ballarat is a very warm and inclusive environment which I treasure greatly.

New Social Committee

At its February AGM, Heartbeat Ballarat elected a new Social Committee. The new Committee has created a variety of new outings, many at no or little cost, which are being very well received. Numbers have been stunningly on the rise and the variety means there is something for everyone. There are now many opportunities for members, which most recently have included monthly lunches, nursery visits, morning teas, music concerts, movie outings and a picnic in a spectacular botanic location. Bus trips with the, Ballarat City Council funded, Ballarat Ageing Well team, have included The Melbourne Flower and Garden Show and the incredible Melbourne LUME Exhibition.

Various Heartbeat Ballarat social events**Visits from Baker Institute researcher**

Nick Kashyap, (from the Baker) has been catching the train to Ballarat most Fridays to interact with members and encourage Heartbeat Ballarat folk to answer a few questions for a research project he is working on. The study aims to explore how people are self-managing cardiovascular disease use apps, the internet, and communications like email, text messages etc. The goal is to design health apps that are more sensitive and effective in supporting patients living with cardiovascular disease.

It would be amazing if we could get even more contributors as it's one signature on a consent form and one short phone interview. Many members have participated and liked Nick's attitude and approach. Mr. Kashyap's heart has also benefited from all those steps he has been taking

in Ballarat. For further information, or to participate please call Nick on 03 9479 2251.

Excitingly, Nick will be a guest speaker at our next meeting, and he will be able to talk about interim results from the study, which will make very interesting findings.

Charity Bowls Tournament



It's with much gratitude that we say thank you to the Ballarat Highlands Bowls Region which once again, in January, held the 2025 Heartbeat Charity Bowls Tournament, which was a tremendous success. This has been an annual fundraiser and a magnificent \$5000 has been donated to Grampians Health and St John of God Hospitals for cardiac health.

Bunnings and Heartbeat Ballarat jointly benefiting Ballarat heart failure patients

Bunnings Creswick Road has donated the first ten of one hundred and ten bathroom scales. Bunnings further assisted by offering Heartbeat a trade discount on the one hundred sets of scales purchased. Funds raised via Bunnings Sausage Sizzle held in

December were used to purchase them.

The scales were delivered to Cardiac Nurse Practitioner, Linda, at Cardiac Outpatients at the Queen Elizabeth Centre (QEC), Ballarat Health Services. The scales will be used at the QEC, in the Grampians Health Harp Program and at the specialist Heart Failure Clinic at the Ballarat Base Hospital. Bathroom scales prevent rehospitalisations when utilised by heart failure patients. Approximately 200 electronic bathroom scales are needed annually in Ballarat and Heartbeat Ballarat has been meeting this need for several years now.



Ballarat Ageing Well Expo

Walk Organiser, Barry Nixon, and six walkers from Heartbeat Ballarat Walking Groups attended the Ballarat Ageing Well Expo in March. The Heartbeat volunteers took shifts throughout the day to share the load and enthusiastically promote Heartbeat peer support and the exercise and social connection opportunities available via the four walking groups held each week. The Heartbeat stall was very busy throughout the event, with lots of people showing interest in Heartbeat and the four walking groups!



Please send us your latest news for inclusion in the Spring 2025 edition of Heartbeat Happenings which will be published in May 2025 (send to vivien@heartbeatvictoria.org.au by Friday August 1, 2025).