

James, 36

Civil project manager, fisherman & outdoors enthusiast, diagnosed with advanced melanoma, *ORANGE*

Civil project manager, fisherman and outdoors enthusiast, James, 36, Orange, lived with advanced melanoma on his left torso that spread to the lymph nodes in his armpit, which were subsequently removed.

Skin melanoma occurs when the pigment-producing cells in the skin (melanocytes) grow uncontrollably, forming an expanding tissue mass, also known as a tumour.¹⁻³ Advanced melanoma happens when the tumour has spread beyond the skin's surface to other parts of the body.^{2,4}

In February 2022, James noticed a mole on his left torso had grown larger, and was starting to rub on his shirt. After three years of failing to undergo an annual skin check due to the COVID-19 pandemic, James decided to visit his local general practitioner (GP) to collect some scripts, and enquire about his enlarged mole.



After performing a biopsy and further tests, James' GP referred him to an Oncologist in Orange, who subsequently diagnosed him with advanced melanoma. He next underwent surgery to remove the melanoma and lymph node in his left armpit, and was also placed on a clinical trial of an immunotherapy in Orange.

During his battle with advanced melanoma, James continued to work a gruelling, 12-hour-long, 60-hour-a-week as a civil project manager. Commencing at 4am every day, James would juggle work with ongoing blood tests, scans, and specialist consults.

Soon the advanced melanoma began to pervade aspects of James' life, particularly from a financial and social perspective. But he continued to "push on".

Participating in a tele-trial in Orange enabled James to continue to participate in the trial without having to commute hours to and from a metropolitan-based hospital, and to keep his job.

Today James welcomes the listing of a new treatment for advanced melanoma on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

This is James' story.

James was raised on a farm where he was exposed to the sun daily, but recalls he was consistently protected.

"I'm of Scottish and Irish heritage. All members of my family are quite pale and have freckly skin.

"So my parents raised me to be sun safe, and always insisted I wear a hat and sunblock," said James.

When James was diagnosed with advanced melanoma in February 2022, he was caught off guard, given his age, his persistence with sun protection, and no known family history of the disease at the time. Another family member has, however, since been diagnosed with melanoma too.

"I had no idea I was living with advanced melanoma. So my diagnosis came as a shock.

"I never suspected I would be diagnosed with advanced melanoma. I was completely caught off guard," James said.

"I was only 35 years of age at the time, and thought I was bulletproof up until then.

"I put on a brave face and was offered surgery because there were no other suitable treatment options available for me at the time," said James.



"I found it very hard to live with advanced melanoma post- diagnosis. I was on top of my career at the time, and was doing well.

"I continued to work 12-hour-long days while receiving treatment, and driving home from Bathurst to Orange. Doctors and specialists continuously rang my phone to discuss my melanoma. It was a highly stressful situation," James said.

"I put on a brave face and managed to get through it all without it affecting my career and my employees. But it had a big effect on my family life. It was tough on my partner and my Mum."

While undergoing treatment for his advanced melanoma throughout the ensuing year, James felt supported by his local oncology team in Orange. His participation in a tele-trial offered him a trial participation option, which enabled him to maintain his career while keeping his family life stable, without the need to travel to Sydney to undergo monthly treatments, scans, and blood tests.

"I didn't sleep much when receiving treatment. I was extremely tired, which made my 12-hour-long days insurmountable. But I just got on with it, and tried to not let it affect me and my family or team too much," said James.

James is extremely grateful to have been presented with the option of participating in a tele-trial.

As a result, James participated in a trial in Orange and says if that option was not available to him, travelling to Sydney would have had impacts on his career and as well as financial pressures.

During his battle with advanced melanoma, James became socially isolated, and spent most of his time at home with his partner. When diagnosed post- COVID-19 pandemic, James struggled to get his social life back in order.

"I didn't want to go out in the sun. I felt extremely fatigued, and didn't feel like doing much. All aspects of my life became overwhelming," said James.

Given James' first-hand experience of living with advanced melanoma, he welcomes today's PBS listing of a new treatment for the disease.

"The availability of a new treatment broadens the range of treatments available, and improves patient access to treatment," James said.

James has a simple, but poignant message for other Australians living with advanced melanoma.

"My message to those who are living with advanced melanoma is that you will get through it. Trust your doctor, just keep going, and live life to the fullest," said James.

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MEDIA ENQUIRIES: Kirsten Bruce & Millie Chamberlain, VIVA! Communications

M 0401 717 566 | 0404 568 615

T 02 9968 3741 | 02 9968 3741

E kirstenbruce@vivacommunications.com.au

millie@vivacommunications.com.au

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