

# Plea to PM's wife on high-cost cancer drug

# Dear Janette, I need your help



**Heartfelt:** Maree Bissels writes her imploring letter to Mrs Howard. Picture: ROB LEESON

MARY PAPADAKIS

A VICTORIAN grandmother battling breast cancer has made an emotional plea for help to Prime Minister John Howard's wife, Janette.

Maree Bissels, 46, hopes Mrs Howard will draw on her experience as a cancer survivor to back calls for a costly new drug treatment to be subsidised by the Government.

But Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott this week told the *Sunday Herald Sun* more evidence was needed before Herceptin could be considered for listing on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme — a process that could take at least a year.

A study has found the drug reduces the risk of HER-2 positive breast cancer returning by 46 per cent.

But its \$70,000 cost puts it out of reach for thousands who need it.

It is only subsidised for late-stage breast cancer.

Drug giant Roche has applied to the Therapeutic Goods Administration to register the drug for use in early breast cancer.

Ms Bissels has written a touching open letter to Mrs Howard in a desperate bid to have the drug's approval fast-tracked.

Ms Bissels, a grandmother and mother of three from Wesburn in Victoria's outer east, said Mrs Howard was in a position to help.

"She is the First Lady — she is there for women," she said.

"I'm hoping she will speak to her husband and bring our heartfelt concerns to him."

Ms Bissels said Mrs Howard, who had surgery for an undisclosed cancer in 1996, would understand her plight and that of the thousands of others diagnosed with cancer.

"She knows right where it hurts," she said.

"It's a horrible feeling and

## 'THIS IS BEYOND COMPREHENSION'

Dear Janette Howard,

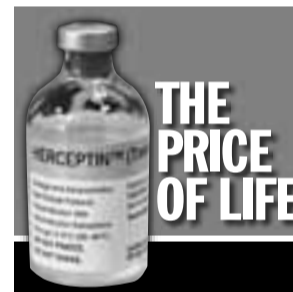
I am writing not only for myself but also for the more than 2000 Australian HER-2 positive breast cancer sufferers who would benefit from the cancer drug, Herceptin. It is tremendous that due to the hard work of cancer researchers that a drug that can give such promising results has been created.

However, unless this medication is put on the PBS, it will not reach all the people who need it. Janette, I implore you, as a wife and mother and a person who knows first-hand the fear and heartache that comes with a cancer diagnosis, please speak to your husband to get this matter rectified right now.

We all wait impatiently for news of breakthroughs in cancer research. Now, with HER-2, that breakthrough is here. Please pass it on to all who need it. I want to live, Janette, I don't want the fear of this disease permeating my life. I see the worry and concern on the faces of my family and that alone destroys me. I want to tell them everything is OK, I want them to know I am having the best treatment available. I am sure you would want the same for your family.

It is one thing to have to cope with an illness that has no treatment, but when there is help available but you just can't afford to access it that is beyond comprehension. This is not just about me and my family, but all the families. Please do what you can to help.

Maree Bissels



tomorrow that dark shadow could be knocking on anyone's door."

Mr Abbott said while the new study was "quite promising", more research was needed.

He said letters sent to oncologists by the Victorian and NSW Breast Cancer Action Groups urging a "balanced" approach when discussing the drug with patients and cautioning the need for more evidence, proved his point.

"Breast cancer is not untreatable but for Herceptin," he said.

"Medical oncologists have to exercise great care when recommending to their patients that they take a drug which is not subsidised on the PBS."

But Breast Cancer Network Australia CEO Lyn Swinburne said the go-slow approach was wrong and slammed the action group's letter.

"They have done women no favours at all. It's playing into the Government's hands," she said.

Mr Abbott said he was concerned about possible side-effects, including heart damage, of the drug.

Prof Ian Olver, chair of the Medical Oncology Group of Australia, said the risks were small.

"Clinicians are recommending its use to patients with heart testing regularly because on balance, the potential benefits far outweigh the risks," he said.

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**Your Say, Page 83**

## Two die in crash

A MAN and a woman in their 20s were killed yesterday when their car and a bus collided.

Sen-Constable Wendy Willingham said the couple's Falcon sedan had been travelling south along Victoria Rd, Northcote, at 2.30pm when the accident happened.

She said it appeared that when the car had hit the bus head-on it had been pushed back into a car travelling in the same direction.

A spokesman from Metropolitan Ambulance Service said no one on the bus had been hurt.

He said a woman in her 60s, believed to be a passenger in the second vehicle, had minor injuries.

## Buyers still in the race

THE property market continued its boom as home-buyers turned out in force at Melbourne auctions yesterday.

The clearance percentage rate remained in the high 60s, where it has been for several months.

The last day of the Spring Racing Carnival distractions saw 67 per cent of properties — more than \$124 million in value — sold. A further \$164 million in private sale properties sold during the week.

A \$1.65 million house in Caroline St, South Yarra, took the honour of the day's most expensive sale, while the highest private sale recorded for the week was \$2.875 mil-

ANDREA MOSS

lion for a Denbigh St, Armadale property.

The most expensive apartment was 87A Malthoura Rd, Toorak, which went for \$1.275 million.

MPRE sold a Mornington property on The Esplanade after auction for \$1.3 million. Agent David Politakis said the house was dilapidated and ready to be bulldozed.

Another derelict property, at 6 Willis St, Balwyn North, went \$103,000 above its reserve to sell for \$723,000 and Williams Batters sold an old house in Palermo St, South Yarra, for \$1 million.

**Auction results, Page 98**

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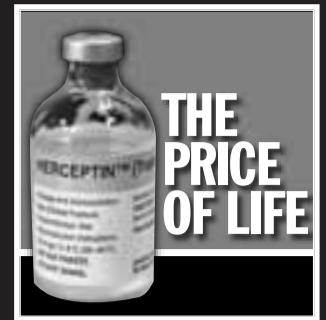
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IMPO035

# Time to act on cancer drug



## A message to the Federal Government

Breast cancer patients, survivors, health advocates and popular identities have united in the fight to have the potentially life-saving drug Herceptin subsidised. Mary Papadakis reports



Victorian Health Minister Bronwyn Pike

"I am urging the Federal Health Minister, Tony Abbott, to fast-track the assessment of this drug for the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme as a matter of urgency. It would be a tragedy if Australian women lost their lives unnecessarily because of bureaucratic delays."



Olympian and breast cancer survivor Raelene Boyle

"This drug is obviously the most significant thing that's happened to breast cancer in tens of years. We need to make sure as a community these people get it. We are talking about mothers and sisters and daughters. This drug has proven that it can save lives."



Breast cancer patient Jennifer Bromley

"Is it that we are not worth the votes so it's not worth saving us? It's just incredible. There are women out there who are not being told about this drug purely because their oncologists know they don't have anything to sell to get it."

Breast cancer patient and Herceptin user Alison McLean, 37

"It's a fantastic drug and every woman should have the opportunity to have it."



Federal Opposition health spokeswoman Julia Gillard

"I strongly endorse the Cancer Council's call for the listing process to be fast-tracked."



Former Victorian Premier Joan Kirner

"Any woman who has breast cancer and any family who experiences a woman with breast cancer fears that they won't be totally clear of it and any drug that safely reduces that fear makes family life and health a whole lot happier. It's a minimum expense really to put it on the drug list given the increased expense of re-treatment."



Breast Cancer Network Australia chair and breast cancer survivor Dr Patricia Edgar, AM

"BCNA is keen to have the approval process fast-tracked, especially for the young women with high-risk breast cancers, to ensure they have the best chance at survival."

Women's Health Victoria executive director Marilyn Beaumont

"The evidence shows its usefulness in prolonging women's lives after diagnosis."



Showbusiness identity Patti Newton

"I am very passionate about this cause having worked with a number of breast cancer charities. I also have a couple of friends fighting breast cancer at the moment and know that if I was in that situation, I'd like to be given every available opportunity of battling this awful disease."

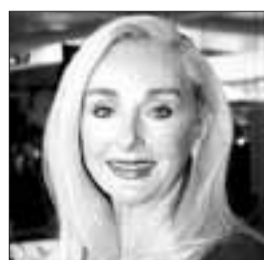


Australian Nursing Federation state secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick

"All Australians should be able to access medicine that can give them a better chance at life. That's what a universal health system is about."

Cancer Council Victoria Helpline director Doreen Akkerman

"Time is of the essence for these women. I fully support the speedy progress of Herceptin through the process of inclusion on the PBS."



Think Pink chair Irene Hendel

"Women can't afford it. No woman should have to be worried about bills while fighting for their life."



Democrats leader Senator Lyn Allison

"The Government needs to weigh up the benefits of new drugs, particularly costly ones."

"However, for women whose lives might be saved, waiting nine months to get Herceptin to the top of the queue to be considered, is far too long."



Breast cancer survivor and founder of Young Action on Breast Cancer Mary Macheras-Magias

"It's important that all women have access to drugs that will help give them the best fighting chance, especially for young women who want to see their children grow up."



National Breast Cancer Foundation chair Ros Kelly AO

"Research into breast cancer is a long-term investment."

"Herceptin is a good example of being able to apply knowledge gained through research into real benefits for a particular group of people affected by breast cancer."

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699 Doncaster Road

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## Sinking teeth into telemarketers

ALMOST 30,000 Australians are using a prepared script designed to give pesky telemarketers a taste of their own medicine.

The script, written by a Dutchman and posted on his website, requires the house-

holder to ask the telemarketer a series of irritating questions.

One of the questions is: "Is it important to have good teeth for your job?"

Martijn Engelbregt came up with the idea for the script

when he received a cold call one Sunday morning at his home in Holland.

More than 29,000 Australians have visited his website, which is at [www.xs4all.nl/~egbg/counterscript.html](http://www.xs4all.nl/~egbg/counterscript.html).

# Stop the rot in our schoolyards

**W**HAT is happening in Victorian judicial decisions? Now we have the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal supporting the Education Department against the rights of the parents to know details of their son's suicide attempt in the schoolyard ("Parents Denied", *Sunday Herald Sun*, October 30).

For any primary school child to feel the desperate need to attempt such an action and the parents not to be notified is in itself a disgrace. For the parents to then be refused information regarding the incident reeks of a cover-up by all sections of the Government.

Nola Martin,  
Preston

## Mean-spirited home

SHAME on the mean-spirited new owner of the Mornington Private Nursing Home for not allowing Ryleigh the Great Dane to continue tail wagging his way into the hearts of residents ("Pet ban angers elderly", *SHS*, October 30).

Animals cheer us up and give comfort when depressed and their offer of unconditional love is inspiring to those who receive few visitors and would otherwise become lonely and withdrawn.

Pam Ahern,  
Willowmavin

## Right royal ructions

RE "Let Mary speak up" (*SHS*, October 30):

*Is Mary in strife as a royal mother and wife? I don't like the look of it. Does Mary no longer fit the royal bill of goodwill?*

Edith Irma Knight,  
Montmorency

## In a bird flu flap

EUROPE is working very hard to find a bird flu vaccine to save lives while our army, and Russ Allison, vice-president of Cemeteries and Crematoria Association of Victoria, think very hard how to dispose or cremate bodies in case of an epidemic bird flu ("Army alert on bird flu", *SHS*, October 30).

Ron Rizzi,  
Springvale South

## Support supporters

GOOD on Jessica Hawker and the *Sunday Herald Sun* (October 30) for making the effort to preserve her baby's right to life.

Let's hope there will be growing support for organisations that respect children's right to life.

Unfortunately, today's society is deceived into believing that sex out of marriage is OK or harmless, but the problems created from it are easy evidence that it's not right.

Let's write to the federal Health Minister Tony Abbott and our federal ministers and call for adequate funding for pregnancy support groups.

G. Beecroft,  
Kyabram

## Be responsible

INSTEAD of Jessica Hawker being angry with Tony Abbott for letting her down by cutting health funds, why doesn't Jessica feel she has let herself down by becoming pregnant for the second time, at the age of 16?

If Jessica and her "partner" had waited another 10 years until they were in a position to support a family she would not have this problem.

When are people going to stop blaming government services and putting their hands out for assistance that should not be given? Jessica can take responsibility for her own predicament and maybe get herself a job, or continue on at school so she has a possibility of gaining employment.

J. Waddingham,  
Lakes Entrance

## Suffering all round

AS a mum, I sympathise with the mother of Tuong Van Nguyen, who is on death row in Singapore for heroin trafficking.

However, if he was not caught and was able to bring his heroin into Australia, many Australian families would go through the heartbreak of losing a loved one because of Nguyen.

If it is Singapore's law that he must die then so be it. He is a drug trafficker even though it may be his first time. He is the scum of the earth.

RIP Jason, age 25  
(name and address supplied)

## He knew it was wrong

I AGREE with Jillian Parker who believes that Nguyen should be sentenced to death for his crime (*SHS*, October 30).

He knew what he was doing and he also knew the consequences.

If a visitor to our country committed a serious crime, we would expect them to face the full force of our judicial system.

Dannielle Tucker,  
Wonthaggi



**Royal trouble and strife?** A reader wonders if new mother Princess Mary of Denmark still fits the royal bill. Picture: REUTERS

## Russian roulette

ALL power to you, Jillian Parker. Tuong Van Nguyen has played Russian roulette with drugs and lost. He knew the consequences and now must pay the ultimate price.

Richard Michalowski,  
St Albans

## Recycled leader

PEOPLE criticising political periods and leaders who have been recycled seem to conveniently forget John Howard was recycled.

A. Stewart,  
Bendigo

Mr Howard recently refused to give a guarantee that no worker would be worse off under the proposed industrial relations laws and replied: "My guarantee is my record."

His record when he was treasurer was: unemployment 10.2 per cent, inflation 11.1 per cent, interest rates 13 per cent and he left the Labor Party a budget deficit of \$9.6 billion (equivalent to about \$30 billion today).

## Cold hearts in Canberra

WHEN will Canberra have a heart?

Yet another sad story of a woman battling breast cancer ("Please save my grandma", *Sunday Herald Sun*, October 30) comes while the Howard Government spends money promoting its industrial relations reforms yet refuses to fund the anti-cancer drug Herceptin.

People before big business?

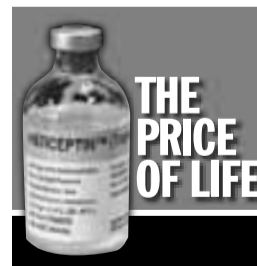
Angry,  
Leopold

## Absolute disgrace

IT is an absolute disgrace that women with terminal cancer cannot receive Herceptin freely. Has our country gone mad? Do we not supply methadone to drug addicts? Who decides what drugs can be given out free?

The Government should be ashamed of its inaction and heartless manner of this matter.

Lyn Mounsey,  
Moe



## Access denied

WHAT a disgrace that a young mum with terminal cancer is not able to have access to a lifesaving drug denied to her by the same politicians stockpiling large amounts of doses of a drug to protect essential workers, including one suspects themselves, from a bird flu that may, or may not cross over to the human population.

Jim Lacey,  
Melbourne

## SHORT & SHARP

### Volunteer grants useful

COMMUNITY groups in rural areas such as the Wimmera would not agree with criticism of the Federal Government's volunteer small equipment grants ("What a huge waste", *Sunday Herald Sun*, October 30). The grants have made — and continue to make — a difference. They have enabled many community groups to buy the equipment they need — whether that be for the work of volunteers or to thank them for their efforts.

Debbie Coyle, manager Wimmera Volunteers

### Centrelink a bully to luckless

MEN working for the dole need a union or an association. Centrelink makes it hell for poor men down on their luck. There should be an independent investigation on how Centrelink operates. I know because my sons have been going to it for seven years and I see them coming home deeply depressed.

Name and address supplied

### Eat, drink and be merry

EVERYONE should eat well. You can look after yourselves by eating and drinking the right things. By doing this you will have less chance of getting sick.

Kimberly Fung, Tracey Ha, Monica Saveski and Laura Oghanna, all 9, of St Catherine's School, Lalor West

### Dressing down Missy

NO way should Missy Higgins in that dress (right) receive a tick as one of the best dressed in *Style Police* (*SHS*, October 30). How can you call yourselves the Fashion Bureau of Investigation when you let Missy get away with fashion murder? She should get life imprisonment.

Stacey Thompson, Tullamarine

### Spirit runs dry

IN THE US — and in some Australian kindergartens — if you put up a Christmas tree you must call it a "friendship tree" or a "giving tree". Americans must make a decision each December whether to risk saying Merry Christmas in public. The war on Christmas is part of a general war on Christianity. It's now an insult to say somebody belongs to the religious Right.

Arnold Jago, Mildura

### Hostile holidays

A WARNING to parents or schoolies contemplating transferring their activities to Victorian resorts after the (Rex Hunt bashing) incident in Byron Bay. Many Victorian holiday areas also are hostile to tourists. I don't know what Lorne is like these days, but in the Anglesea/Torquay area it's cantankerous local authorities who bully the kids.

Paul Torney, email

### Testing time for new laws

THE Government claims its industrial relations changes will improve productivity, investment, the economy, wages and employment. It's interesting no assertion is made that workers' rights are protected by law only while they stay in their present job? Politicians should try working conditions and socialise with people other than the wealthy. Not all the village idiots are at the bottom of the socio-economic stack — and not all the bright are at the top.

Brent Howard, Rydalmore

### Glaring IR omission

IN court you are sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth. With so many millions of our dollars being spent to sell the IR reforms, why not say that workers' rights are protected by law only while they stay in their present job? Politicians should try working conditions and socialise with people other than the wealthy. Not all the village idiots are at the bottom of the socio-economic stack — and not all the bright are at the top.

P. McMaster, Glen Waverley

### A dilemma for women

I AM a university-educated, 29-year-old professional who is now a stay-at-home mum. Women have been conned into believing we can have it all when it comes to career and children, but, unfortunately, this is not true. I took one path, others may take the other. When women reach a certain age, pregnancy is not assured. Many women are left wondering was it worth it — money or children, lonely and rich, poor with joy.

Amanda, email

## CONTACT US

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