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HEALTH - The story of Cabrini Health in Australia started in 1948, when 10 Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus—founded in 1880 by a 30-year-old Italian woman, Francesca Cabrini—arrived in Melbourne to take over the management of a small 45-bed community hospital named St Benedict’s in Malvern.

The journey from Italy took 10 days, as the plane could only fly during daylight hours. The sisters believed they were taking over a fully functioning hospital, but this was not the case. They worked hard to equip and make the place presentable so they could carry on Mother Cabrini’s work of serving those in need and relieving suffering.

Sixty-seven years later, the same spirit of Mother Cabrini and the founding sisters still lives on at Cabrini Health, which now has 832 beds, 4300 staff, 200 volunteers and 1000 accredited medical specialists over several sites across Melbourne.

There are acute facilities at Malvern, Prahran and Brighton, a residential aged-care home at Ashwood and a rehabilitation service at Elsternwick.

There is also the Cabrini Institute, which supports ongoing education and research for doctors and staff to improve the quality of care for patients; and the Cabrini Foundation, which oversees

and guides all fundraising activities on behalf of Cabrini.

Most recently, the Cabrini community has celebrated the opening of a new purpose-built floor on the existing Malvern building rooftop. It took 12 months to complete and cost \$31 million—money that came from Cabrini’s surplus income and philanthropic donations.

The development comprises a Mother and Baby Centre, a Hematology and Oncology Centre and two new cardiac catheterisation laboratories equipped with the most sophisticated X-ray imaging systems, which are key to minimally invasive cardiac and cardiovascular procedures. About 2500 people are expected to be treated in this facility during its first 12 months of operation.

According to Executive Director of Cabrini Malvern, Dr Simon Woods, ‘the needs of the patient are the primary focus’ and are at the heart of this latest redevelopment. ‘It’s at the heart of all we do,’ he said.

In explaining the Mother and Baby Centre, he said: ‘It is about the whole-patient experience, including the physical environment and the availability of everything in the one space. Pregnant women will find everything they need, from the time of conception to post-pregnancy, in the one place. Our obstetricians and neonatologists are located together with allied health-care professionals so that care for mothers will flow seamlessly; it’s very holistic.’

The centre includes obstetrics, paediatrics, antenatal ultrasound facilities, lactation consultants, physiotherapists, psychologists for postnatal depression, dietitians and diabetes educators. There is also a special-care nursery.

‘Traditionally, women might have to travel to various locations across the city for each separate service, but now they can find everything here, on the same floor,’ he said.

‘There’s also the issue of safety. There are more obstetricians in the environment at any one time, which gives us a higher degree of safety for emergency obstetrics.’

Enhancing patients' experience has been at the heart of the development. There is a lot of natural light throughout the floor and the consulting rooms all face outwards.

'It's all been designed so that people feel relaxed and comfortable,' said Dr Woods. 'Yes, you're in a hospital, but hopefully it doesn't feel like you're in a hospital. It's very much focussed on the patient experience, safety and convenience.'

The Mother and Baby Centre has several waiting areas, with 'substations' tucked away in quiet areas for those mothers who may prefer this. 'We understand that not everybody has had a happy experience,' explained Dr Woods. 'Some women will have had an ultrasound and have found out that they've miscarried, so having just one waiting area, where there are mothers with babies in strollers, might be a bit distressing.'

The new Haematology and Oncology Centre has brought together in one space all the hospital's specialists in the treatment of blood disorders and cancer—haematologists, oncologists, radiotherapists, a palliative-care specialist, registrars and allied health-care professionals.

Associate Professor Ian Haines has been an oncologist at Cabrini Malvern for 28 years, when the service of cancer patients had just started at the hospital. He has 'watched the service grow, develop and respond to the ever-changing needs of this community of cancer patients'.

'I think Cabrini always saw it as part of its mission to look after patients with cancer and saw there was a need. The hospital has always responded very well to the needs of the patients and reasonable requests from medicos in terms of building up this service, and meeting the needs of the community.'

'I was the only one when I started in 1987 and now there are a lot of oncologists—I've lost count of how many there are! We have radiation doctors who come from the Alfred Hospital now and consult every day. And we have a huge number of very specialised surgical teams doing very specialised surgical care, so we can now offer very modern, up-to-date, state-of-the-art cancer treatment.'

'We have a lot of clinical trials going on, so we can offer patients investigational and research treatments. Our nursing services have always been strong and that's continued. And they've added other ancillary services so now we have a psychologist, a psychiatrist and social workers.'

'We also have a very good volunteer service that looks after our cancer patients and [that does] all those lovely extra things that make the experience tolerable, bearable and sometimes even enjoyable, hopefully. All of this provides a therapeutic environment.'

It is evident Associate Professor Haines enjoys coming to work and, while 'not Catholic by upbringing', he 'loves the way the Catholic Church does health care'.

'I think they do it very well', he said. 'A lot of that comes from the mission statement and from the ethos of the sisters originally. I see that as a huge reason for the success of Cabrini hospital—their ethos keeps us centred. You've always got that mission so you don't get lost in the business case. The business case is part of it, but the mission statement sets the focus for "what are the needs of the community".'

Dr Woods echoed these words. He said the Cabrini Sisters' vision and mission 'genuinely informs many strategic and operational discussions and decisions around the sorts of patient services provided and how we do that. We're really trying to offer "from cradle to the grave" support for our patients, so everything from before you're born to palliative care. It's all part of that holistic approach to caring, and which is very much informed by the vision of the Cabrini sisters.'

At the entrance to Cabrini Malvern, a large portrait of Mother Cabrini hangs on the wall behind the reception desk. This same portrait can be found on numerous walls throughout the hospital. One need not spend too long there before understanding that Mother Cabrini's spirit of compassion and care, and the work of the founding sisters, lives on in the people who have now been entrusted at Cabrini Health to care for those in need.

Cabrini Health is a Catholic, private, not-for-profit health service. All surplus money raised goes

back into its services and facilities. For more information, visit www.cabrini.com.au

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