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For immediate release

NZALS and Amputees Federation of New Zealand Inc.

Support for amputees by volunteers who have already adjusted to their own limb loss has begun nationally with the launch of the new Peer Support Service by the New Zealand Artificial Limb Service (NZALS).

So far, the New Zealand Artificial Limb Service has over 55 volunteers who have begun to visit and provide support to their fellow amputees.

New Zealand's service has been developed as a collaboration between Amputees Federation of New Zealand Inc., New Zealand Artificial Limb Service and Limbs 4 Life Australia.

NZALS CEO Sean Gray says peer support has proven to be helpful for people adjusting to life-changing events and their ongoing journey of rehabilitation.

"We also know from research and professional opinion that access to good peer support can enhance an amputee's quality of life and help them understand what can be expected from changes they are going through."

Trained volunteers are matched to recipients according to age, gender, site of amputation and social interests. Volunteers are trained not to provide counselling or medical advice but rather encourage people to seek professional help when they need it.

The volunteers provide informal support, particularly to new amputees, by sharing their own personal experiences, discussing problems or stresses, encouraging people needing support to seek assistance and providing information on other available support services. Support is offered both face-to-face and by phone.

Garth Johnston was a recipient of the Limbs 4 Life Australian programme, on which the New Zealand has modelled its service, following his below the knee amputation in 2017. He describes his peer support volunteer as "honest, encouraging, logical, and inspirational".

Garth's amputation followed an accident in 2015 when a 300lb pallet fell and crushed his toes resulting firstly in toe amputations and then three years later, following infection, a below the knee amputation.

He says his peer supporter helped him set manageable goals "to promote my enthusiasm" and connect him to other amputees in his home state of Tasmania and the rest of Australia. The whole experience means he has attained many new friends, confidants and peers.

"I am richly blessed. This little sub-culture of people, to which I am humbly added, are the genuine meaning of 'empathetic, understanding, caring and loving' people, from 'understanding'. Lots of other people genuinely love me and care, but not from understanding. It's so profound, palpable and tangible that I'm spoilt to have 'both'," he says.

NZALS ran a pilot Peer Support Service with field officers from the Wellington and Hawke's Bay Amputee Societies in NZALS centres and regional clinics. Sean says they provided amputees with a friendly voice, were a translator of health jargon, helped amputees connect with other health professional and groups and acted as a champion to support the needs of those who might not know what to say or how to say it.

“My personal observations have shown Peer Support to be a valuable service to amputees,” Sean says.

His observation is backed by research which shows that there are a multitude of benefits from peer support which include boosting self-esteem, reduced isolation and larger social networks, decreased psychiatric symptoms; improved decision making; increased support seeking and greater pursuit of educational and employment goals.

People can volunteer or request support on the Peer Support Service website at www.peersupport.nz.

Media Contact

Kathryn Scott – Communications Advisor, New Zealand Artificial Limb Service

T: 04 385 9410

kathryn.scott@nzals.co.nz