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12 March 2013

Indigenous cancer centre of excellence unveiled

The launch of Australia's first Indigenous cancer research centre is set to improve the diagnosis, treatment and survival rates for Indigenous Australians with cancer.

Cancer is the second leading cause of death among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Menzies School of Health Research (Menzies) will unveil the Centre of Research Excellence (CRE), titled DISCOVER-TT, or Discovering Indigenous Strategies to improve Cancer Outcomes Via Engagement, Research Translation and Training.

Menzies' Senior researcher, Associate Professor Gail Garvey said the launch of DISCOVER-TT in Brisbane today represented a huge step forward to improving the cancer outcomes among Indigenous cancer patients.

"Until now cancer has been a low priority on the Indigenous health agenda, despite the disease accounting for a greater number of deaths each year than diabetes and kidney disease," A/Prof Garvey said.

"There is a clear need to improve health services for people with cancer by using the information we do have and by identifying knowledge gaps. DISCOVER-TT will allow us to bring together key researchers, health professionals, and consumer advocacy groups from across Australia, and actively promote the translation of research knowledge into Australian public health policy and practice.

A/Prof Garvey said that with Australian Government funding of \$2.5 million over five years, DISCOVER-TT would support both existing and new researchers - including Indigenous early-career researchers in cancer control and ensure work is relevant and applicable.

Staff from DISCOVER-TT will work alongside esteemed health researcher and former President of the Australasian Epidemiological Association, Professor Joan Cunningham and in collaboration with researchers from several centres across Australia.

Indigenous breast cancer survivor and cancer care advocate, 'Aunty' Margaret Lawton from Griffith, Brisbane, joined today's launch to raise awareness about DISCOVER-TT and Indigenous cancer.

Mrs Lawton is twice a breast cancer survivor and has been proactive in Indigenous cancer care, working as one of Breast Cancer Network Australia's first Indigenous liaison officers, in addition to volunteering her time in various hospitals.

"I think DISCOVER-TT is a wonderful initiative because it will bring together some of the brightest minds across a range of disciplines to improve the knowledge base about Indigenous cancer and help people living with cancer," she said.

Cancer Australia's CEO Professor Helen Zorbas said DISCOVER-TT represented an important initiative to improve cancer outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

"The launch of Discover-TT is promising, exciting and illustrates the importance of cross-sectoral partnerships and their capacity to impact on policy and to improve and advance health outcomes," she said.

Launch details: 9am – 10.30am Tuesday, 12 March 2013, Victoria Barracks, Petrie Terrace, Brisbane.

Facts about Indigenous cancer

- Cancer survival is lower for Indigenous Australians than it is for non-Indigenous Australians. It is the second leading cause of death among Indigenous people, accounting for a greater number of deaths each year than diabetes and kidney disease
- The death rate for all cancers combined and for most individual cancers is significantly higher for Indigenous than other Australians: e.g. cervical cancer (4.4 times), lung cancer (1.8), pancreatic cancer (1.3) and breast cancer in females (1.3)
- Indigenous Australians have a much lower incidence of some cancers compared to other Australians (breast, prostate, testicular, colorectal and brain cancer, melanoma of skin, lymphoma and leukaemia) but they have a much higher incidence of others (lung and other smoking-related cancers, cervix, uterus and liver cancer)

For example:

- Cervical cancer incidence rate is almost three times as higher for Indigenous Australians as for non-Indigenous Australians (18 and 7 per 100,000 respectively).
- Incidence rates of lung cancer are significantly higher for Indigenous Australians than for non-Indigenous Australians (1.9 times)
- Most of the cancers that have a high occurrence among Indigenous people are preventable, including cervix, liver and smoking related cancers
- Indigenous adult cancer patients have substantial unmet supportive care needs. Their highest needs include additional support with psychological and practical assistance
- Basic infrastructure and logistical issues may also impede Indigenous people's access to cancer care and treatment services. These include a lack in the provision of transport and having appropriate travel arrangements, and suitable accommodation for both the patient and their support person

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Menzies Background

Menzies School of Health Research is a national leader in Indigenous and tropical health research. It is the only medical research institute in the Northern Territory, with more than 300 staff working in over 60 communities across central and northern Australia, as well as developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Menzies is also a significant contributor to health education and research training.