

4 February 2013

New network to push Indigenous cancer into the spotlight

A new national cancer research network will launch on World Cancer Day aimed at improving quality of life and survival rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cancer patients in Australia.

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

The National Indigenous Cancer Network (NICaN) launches at Cancer Council Australia in Sydney today; it encourages and supports collaboration in Indigenous cancer research and the delivery of services to Indigenous people with cancer, including carers and families.

Senior cancer researcher Associate Professor Gail Garvey of the Menzies School of Health Research said today's launch, fittingly coinciding with World Cancer Day, represents a huge step forward towards closing the gap on Indigenous cancer mortality rates.

"Until now cancer has been a low priority on the Indigenous health agenda, despite the disease being the second leading cause of death among Indigenous people and accounting for a greater number of deaths each year than diabetes and kidney disease.

"We know that Indigenous people with cancer have more advanced disease when diagnosed, are less likely to receive treatment, and are more likely to die from their cancers than other Australians. There is a clear need to improve health services for people with cancer by utilising the information we do have and by identifying knowledge gaps.

"NICaN is about making sure that what's known about cancer in Indigenous Australians is available for use by people with cancer, their families, practitioners, policy makers and researchers," Assoc Prof Garvey said.

Professor Ian Olver, CEO, Cancer Council Australia said NICaN will bring together key researchers, practitioners, and consumer advocacy groups from across Australia.

"NICaN will actively promote the conversion of research knowledge into Australian health policy and practices, as well as identify areas where more research is needed."

Indigenous breast cancer survivor Adelaide Saylor joined today's launch to raise awareness about NICaN and the 2013 World Cancer Day theme: 'dispelling damaging myths and misconceptions about cancer'.

Mrs Saylor, who was born in Babinda, North Queensland, and lives in Brisbane, said this year's theme was particularly relevant given the lack of open discussion and general awareness about cancer in many Indigenous communities.

"I had breast cancer two years ago and the only reason I got checked was because my husband forced me to go to an appointment. I was lucky because the tumor was only the size of a grain of rice and I recovered after chemotherapy.

"I didn't know much about cancer because it was never spoken about with our mob even though four of my aunties were diagnosed with cancer – two with bowel cancer; one with cervical cancer; and one with breast cancer. Two of my aunties later died. That forced my other aunties to act and now they're living healthy normal lives.

"I think NICaN is a wonderful initiative because it will raise awareness amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and that is desperately needed," said Mrs Saylor.

Along with NICaN network meetings and roundtables, NICaN's resources (www.cancerinfonet.org.au) include plain language information about cancer, state and national policies and strategies that address cancer among Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, programs and projects, a comprehensive depository of publications and organisations, conference presentations, and workforce and training opportunities.

NICaN is a partnership between Menzies School of Health Research, the Australian Indigenous Health/InfoNet, the Lowitja Institute, Cancer Council Australia and Indigenous audiences, consumers, researchers and health professionals from a broad range of disciplines, service providers, private sector and government organisations.

For more background read: www.menzies.edu.au/node/54990
For more information visit <http://www.cancerinfonet.org.au>

Launch details: 11:00am – 12:00pm Monday 4th February 2013, Cancer Council Australia, Lvl 14-477 Pitt St, Sydney

Media contact:

Photos are attached below. For interviews contact: Alice Plate, alice.plate@menzies.edu.au; 0400 045 999

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

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.