

Indigenous kids face higher risk of childhood cancer death

Thursday, 20 March 2014

Indigenous Australian children are 36 per cent more likely to die within five years of a cancer diagnosis than non-Indigenous Australian children, a landmark new report has found.

Released on national Close the Gap day, it is the first time researchers have compared differences in childhood cancer survival on a national basis between Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous children.

The joint study between Cancer Council Queensland, the Menzies School of Health Research and QIMR Berghofer examined data between 1997 and 2007, finding the five-year relative survival rate for non-Indigenous children was about 82 per cent, compared to just 75 per cent for Indigenous children.

Cancer Council Queensland spokesperson Katie Clift said the findings were a concern.

“There are a range of possible reasons for this disparity, which urgently needs to be addressed,” Ms Clift said.

“While researchers found no significant difference in urban areas, the findings suggest remoteness is a major factor, whereby Indigenous children in outer regional, remote or very remote areas of Australia have a significantly increased risk of death compared to other children in the same region.

“This could mean that access to diagnostic and treatment services in outer regional and remote areas may be a greater barrier for Indigenous children than non-Indigenous children.”

The report also found that survival was comparatively lower for Indigenous children after adjusting for stage at diagnosis, indicating that at least some of the disparity in outcome was due to issues other than early detection.

“This finding emphasises the need for more research to understand why Indigenous children are less likely to survive a cancer diagnosis than non-Indigenous children,” Ms Clift said.

“Other studies have found cultural and cross-cultural issues, such as fear of death or failure to be offered or to fully understand treatment options, play a substantial part in treatment compliance.

“Early detection must go hand in hand with appropriate and timely cancer treatment after diagnosis, to improve the child’s chances of survival and quality of life.

“While there are only minor differences in survival for leukaemia and brain tumours, Indigenous children are nearly twice as likely as other children to die within five years from other solid tumours such as lymphomas or neuroblastoma.

“Greater awareness and ongoing research are vital to overcoming this disparity and closing this unacceptable survival gap.”

The study authors recommended additional research into treatment and patterns of care for Indigenous children, to inform public health and clinical interventions and improve Indigenous childhood cancer survival.

More information about Cancer Council Queensland is available at www.cancerqld.org.au or Cancer Council Helpline 13 11 20.

ENDS

For more information or interviews, please contact:

Katie Clift, Executive Manager, Media and Spokesperson, Cancer Council Queensland
Ph: (07) 3634 5372 or 0409 001 171

Menzies Background

Menzies School of Health Research is Australia's only Medical Research Institute dedicated to improving Indigenous health and wellbeing. We have a 28-year history of scientific discovery and public health achievement. Menzies works at the frontline, partnering with over 60 Indigenous communities across Northern and Central Australia. We collaborate to create resources, grow local skills and find enduring solutions to problems that matter.