

Media Release
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Australian cancer prevalence exceeds 1 million: new estimates

Time to rethink management of our most feared disease

The number of Australians living with cancer or having survived a diagnosis has exceeded 1 million for the first time¹, highlighting a change in how we should manage the disease, according to Cancer Council Australia.

Professor Sanchia Aranda, CEO of Cancer Council Australia and President Elect of the Union for International Cancer Control, said the new estimate of 1.1 million, released by Cancer Council on World Cancer Day (4 Feb), reflected progress in healthcare but presented new challenges.

“The main reason for the increase in cancer prevalence is that we are living longer in general and more people with cancer are surviving,” Professor Aranda said. “Around 130,000 Australians are likely to be diagnosed with cancer this year and more than 65 per cent will survive for five years, with many going into permanent remission.”

Professor Aranda said despite the good news, the burden of life years lost to cancer was increasing relative to other disease groups, in Australia and globally. “There is also a stark inequity in outcomes – and addressing inequity has to be a priority. Inequities exist between demographic groups and also between people with different cancer types and experiences.

“Governments in Australia have performed pretty well in delivering public health programs, but we’ve barely scratched the surface on these trends. New health system efficiencies, targeting expenditure to highest need, addressing issues like the cost of cancer medicines – these challenges are mounting.

“There’s a robust health reform debate in Australia at present. More than a million Australians living with or having survived cancer should be at the forefront of the discussion. We also need to do practical things on the ground to support our survivors, as a community.”

Professor Aranda said cancer survivors could be a powerful constituency, with more than one in 20 voting-age Australians now directly affected. She said the sheer numbers of patients and survivors also provided a great opportunity for peer support – something Cancer Council could facilitate.

This year’s World Cancer Day theme was “We Can. I Can”, highlighting how communities and individuals could help to reduce cancer burden.

“A third of cancers are caused by smoking, diet, obesity, UV and alcohol – fear of a preventable cancer should encourage people to reduce those risks,” Professor Aranda said. “However, that same fear can discourage people from getting health checks that could lead to early intervention and better outcomes. People also fall through cracks in the system, leading to avoidable mortality and morbidity. These are systems and equity issues that can be addressed.”

Professor Aranda said cancer survivors also lived with specific physical and emotional needs. “Cancer survivors can also volunteer with Cancer Connect, our peer support program, so they can share their experience and provide emotional support and assistance to their peers.”

For more information on these services, Australians can call 13 11 20.

“Multiple surveys have shown cancer to be Australia’s most feared disease, and with good reason,” Professor Aranda said. “But it is also increasingly a part of our lives. Long term survival is a reality for most Australians who get cancer. Increasing the number of survivors should be a community goal.”

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Notes to Editors:

World Cancer Day is an international event coordinated by the Union for International Cancer Control. This year's theme is "We Can. I Can." For more information head to worldcancerday.org

ⁱ Prevalence estimated by Cancer Council NSW's Cancer Research Division with extrapolation of published data (2004, 2007 and 2009) and Australian estimated population numbers.