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Medical research must include focus on better use of existing technology, Cancer Council and COSA tell Senate inquiry

Cancer Council Australia and the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia have called for new research into improved use of Australia's existing health system and technology, in response to a Senate inquiry into research funding for poor-survival cancers.

On Thursday 18 May, Cancer Council and COSA are appearing at a hearing for the multi-partisan inquiry, which was driven by brain cancer survivor, Senator Catryna Bilyk.

Cancer Council Australia CEO, Professor Sanchia Aranda, said the inquiry was a timely opportunity to focus on the prioritisation of biomedical research and opportunities to do much better with existing technologies.

"Much of this inquiry will focus on laboratory research and discovery, as it should, but we must not lose sight of lost opportunities within our current health system to reduce stark survival inequities between cancer types," Professor Aranda said.

"Lung cancer is a good example. It's the leading cause of cancer death in Australia by a big margin. At present five-year survival for lung cancer is just 16 per cent, compared with 68 per cent for all cancers combined. Some of those survivors will be individuals who may have been lucky enough to get an early diagnosis and optimal treatment.

"The same random outcomes are likely to apply to other poor-survival cancers, particularly those in the abdominal area such as pancreatic, adrenal and kidney cancers. We don't have a systematic way of knowing why some people survive for five years when most people don't – because the research hasn't been funded."

Professor Aranda said one of the reasons five-year breast cancer survival in Australia was 90 per cent was that the pathways to diagnosis and treatment were well-defined.

"A starting point to learn from successes in breast cancer care could be to set up a pilot study, funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council, with people reporting intra-abdominal symptoms which often get dismissed being referred to a diagnostic clinic for monitoring.

"If we can become more systematic in detecting and managing some of the poor-survival cancers, we could help people now – at the same time as we change the culture of biomedical research to develop new treatments for all of the forgotten cancers."

CEO of Cancer Council Victoria, Todd Harper, who will appear before the hearing, said there were also opportunities to change the way research is funded to develop research capacity in less common cancers, including biomedical and epidemiological research.

"Given the Australian Government's strong commitment to cancer research through both the Medical Research Future Fund and the National Health and Medical Research Council, we have a great opportunity to build a structure that develops research collaborations for brain, pancreatic and other 'forgotten' cancers," Mr Harper said.

"There is some talk and a few tentative efforts, but we need a formal framework and a collaborative model for the Medical Research Future Fund and the NHMRC to provide dual funding streams into research for poor-survival cancers."

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