

Media release

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**Clinical
Oncological
Society of
Australia**

Parents who can talk about their cancer help children cope better

Parents with cancer who try to protect their children by not talking about their illness can make it harder for the children to cope with the inevitable changes cancer would bring to their lives, a national cancer meeting was told today (25/11).

Presenting the findings of a pilot program to The Clinical Oncological Society of Australia's Annual Scientific Meeting in Canberra, Australia's largest gathering of cancer experts, John Friedsam said while it was natural for parents to want to protect their children, talking openly with them could reduce anxiety and depression and help them cope better.

Mr Friedsam, coordinator of family support at The Cancer Council NSW, said while it was natural for parents to want to protect their children by keeping quiet about their illness or limiting what they told them, children were "incredibly perceptive". "Kids notice things are not quite right," he said. "They can pick up on even a slight change in their routine, something as simple as dad picking them up from school instead of mum. They may notice changes in body language or whispered discussions they are excluded from.

"But if a child is not told the truth, their imagination can easily run wild. They can construct a fantasy that is often far worse than the reality, creating unnecessary anguish both for the child and their family," he said.

The Australian-first pilot, run by The Cancer Council NSW, CanSupport and Pam McLean Cancer Communications Centre, involved telegroup counselling with small groups of parents aimed at helping parents communicate with their children about cancer.

"We discovered early on the key to supporting the children was to support the parents," explained Amanda O'Reilly, manager of CanSupport. "The program aims to open up the communication channels, both verbal and non-verbal between the parent who has cancer, their partner and their children."

"Parents can use a number of tools including visual cues such as fridge magnets, drawing and journal writing to communicate with their children – whatever they feel works best for their child. They are, after all, the experts when it comes to their children; we are simply assisting them to communicate more effectively."

Following the success of the parent telegroup pilot, a similar pilot for children is planned for 2005 and a resource book is also being developed.

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