

Media release

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Genomic discovery outpacing Australia's 'outmoded' health system

PERTH: Australia's ability to exploit new knowledge in genomics is under threat because of an outmoded health system that can't keep pace with the rate of genomic discovery, a conference of cancer experts will be told today (17/11).

According to Dr David Thomas, from the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre in Melbourne, governments needed to urgently reassess the way "radically advanced information" was being utilised in a system that was 30 years old and in urgent need of an overhaul.

Speaking at the Clinical Oncological Society of Australia's Annual Scientific Meeting, Dr Thomas said cancer treatment had been transformed by the capacity to decode the cancer genome quickly and affordably, and to identify the presence of gene mutations that predicted how patients would respond to targeted therapies.

"This quantum leap in knowledge has fundamentally changed the paradigm of cancer care, with ramifications for the entire health system," Dr Thomas said. "Obstacles to progress are no longer biotechnological, but relate to our restricted capacity to assess and make use of the knowledge.

"We need systemic change to create a system that can evolve as rapidly as genomic development so that new research can be integrated more quickly into clinical care."

Dr Thomas cited expected growth in clinical trials participation as an example of how the current system couldn't cope. "Average participation in a clinical trial is currently five per cent," he said. "But given the acceleration in knowledge and drug development, the majority of cancer patients will soon be accessing new drugs via clinical trials, because regulatory systems aren't keeping pace."

Dr Thomas said the required changes had social, political and economic ramifications. Interactions between ethics committees, research funding bodies, pharmaceutical companies, regulatory bodies, government and the public needed to be overhauled. Additionally, the economic implications of the wave of newly available treatments needed to be examined.

"Given that genetics play a role in many parts of a cancer patient's journey - from risk identification and screening, to diagnosis and therapy - keeping up with the genomic revolution is vital to the future of cancer care.

"The most important factor is time. With around 300 Australians a day diagnosed with cancer, the pace of genomic discovery is now threatening to outpace our ability to exploit new knowledge, and is costing time that cancer patients do not have."

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