



MEDIA RELEASE

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One in three cancer patients financially stretched by cost of treatment

One in three cancer patients experiences a significant financial burden due to the cost of cancer medication, according to new research being presented at the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia's Annual Scientific Meeting today (18/11) in Hobart.

The study also found around two-thirds of cancer patients who had been working when diagnosed experienced a change in their employment and found themselves on a lower income following a cancer diagnosis, further highlighting the financial stress that cancer patients endure.

On average, patients who had experienced a drop in their wages found themselves earning half of what they had prior to their diagnosis. Those who had experienced a drop in income since being diagnosed were also four times more likely to say they were under heavy or extreme financial hardship.

Associate Professor Christine Paul, from the University of Newcastle and Hunter Medical Research Institute, who is presenting the research, said Australians who hadn't experienced cancer first hand might find the results surprising.

"There is an assumption living in Australia that because we have a good health system, when you get sick you aren't at financial disadvantage – but people who have been diagnosed with cancer know that this isn't necessarily the case," Professor Paul said.

"As well as hefty medication bills, there is often the complication of not being able to work and earn your usual income. Often cancer strikes when we are middle aged and expecting to be earning a full income – this change in circumstances puts patients under a lot of stress and impacts their psychological wellbeing."

A/Professor Paul said their stretched financial situation also impacted how cancer patients thought through decisions about treatment.

"When asked how their finances might impact their decisions about treatment, the most common factors were the cost of travelling to and from treatment and loss of income."

Despite the findings, Professor Paul said that relatively few cancer patients changed their treatment plans as a result of financial stress.

"Around 70 per cent of those who had been financially impacted by their diagnosis said that it made their decisions about treatment difficult, but did not ultimately change what treatment they decided to undergo."

Clinical Oncology Society of Australia President, Professor Mei Krishnasamy, said as well as reducing the cost of medication for cancer patients, more needed to be done to support

cancer patients in the workplace and to promote services available to cancer patients, with 74 per cent of patients saying they didn't receive any form of financial assistance.

"This survey demonstrated low awareness of the financial support services available to cancer patients," Professor Krishnasamy said. "Only around one in three cancer patients surveyed in this research who weren't accessing financial support were aware of the services and support available through Centrelink and cancer organisations."

The research was funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council and conducted with input from Cancer Council NSW.

Key findings

- One third (33%) of patients reported experiencing moderate or heavy financial burden in the three months prior due to prescribed medicines.
- 66% of patients indicated a change in their employment following their diagnosis.
- 63% of patients who had been employed at diagnosis reported a reduced income since being diagnosed with cancer.
- A mean reduction to approximately half of diagnosis income was reported by those with a reduced income and who had been employed (F/T or P/T) at diagnosis.
- The most common financial factors influencing treatment decision making were the cost of travelling to and from treatment (15%) and loss of income (14%).
- Most (71%) of those impacted by a financial factor indicated that the financial factor made the decision difficult, but did not change their treatment decision.
- More than one third of those who did not access financial assistance were unaware it was available.
- Those having a reduced income since being diagnosed with cancer had over four times the odds of reporting a heavy or extreme financial burden associated with prescribed medicines for cancer.

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Notes to Editors:

"Cancer Medicine Affordability and Financial Impacts of Cancer in Australia: Impacts on Decision Making and Perceived Financial Burden" will be presented at the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia Annual Scientific Meeting on Wednesday 18 November 2015.

Methodology: 269 participants in oncology outpatient departments in two hospitals in regional NSW and metropolitan Victoria completed a pen and paper questionnaire.