

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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**Thursday 10 November, 2005**

### **Cancer myths and facts Expert advises don't panic: seek advice**

Rumours and speculative reports about possible cancer causes can lead to needless worry and steer people from making healthy lifestyle choices, according to a visiting expert.

Victorian epidemiologist Dr Dallas English will tell Cancer Council public meetings in Hobart, Launceston and Devonport this week that it can be very difficult for people to work out how much weight to give to rumours and news reports about what causes the disease that Australians fear most.

“The bottom line is that if people are concerned after hearing or reading about a possible new cancer cause and the information hasn't come from a recognised authority, they should seek independent, expert advice,” he said.

“People need accurate information to make informed lifestyle choices for good health, and they will sometimes need help in working out what's fact, what's myth, and what's still unknown.”

Dr English, who is Associate Director of The Cancer Council Victoria's Cancer Epidemiology Centre, is in Tasmania to speak at free *Cancer Update* public presentations hosted by The Cancer Council Tasmania as part of the organisation's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary year (*presentation details below*).

At current incidence rates, one in three Tasmanian men and one in four women will develop cancer before the age of 75. An estimated 7000 Tasmanians are currently living with cancer. More than 2500 new cases are diagnosed among Tasmanians each year, and more than 1100 Tasmanians die from cancer each year.

A Roy Morgan poll has shown 60% of Australians rate cancer as the most important health issue, and West Australian research indicates that just hearing the word 'cancer' is enough to scare people.

“If someone wants to believe an internet hoax that shampoo or lead in lipstick causes cancer, they're not going to be doing themselves any harm if they stop using these products,” Dr English said.

“But if they act on the belief that they can't get lung cancer because they only smoke light cigarettes or cigars, or only smoke socially, there could be more serious consequences.”

Dr English said at least one in three cancer cases could be prevented by acting on what we know does cause the disease.

“At least 800 new Tasmanian cancer cases each year would be due to smoking, sun exposure, poor diet, alcohol, inadequate exercise or being overweight,” he said.

“The pool of quality information about cancer causes is gradually increasing, and cancer control organisations like the Cancer Councils will update their advice to the public as any new, conclusive evidence comes to light.”

The Chief Executive Officer of The Cancer Council Tasmania, Mr Lawson Ride, said there is an average of three cancer risk issues raised in the Australian media each week.

“The media is doing its job by reporting the results of new studies into possible cancer causes, but there’s often not enough room in their stories for independent analysis or interpretation of preliminary research results,” he said.

“And while the internet has given us access to a huge amount of high quality health information, it’s also been a breeding ground for hoax chain mail spreading alarming misinformation.

“Don’t assume everything you read is always true – do your research by logging onto a quality health website, asking a health professional, or using a service like the Cancer Council Helpline.”

Tasmanians can call the Cancer Helpline on 13 11 20 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in the state.

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### **Interview opportunity**

Dr English and Mr Ride will be available for interview at **10.30am today** at the offices of The Cancer Council Tasmania, 180-184 Collins St, Hobart.

**For further information**, please contact Jenny Denholm on (03) 6223 2030 or 0437 196 820.

### **About Dr Dallas English**

Dr English’s work involves the collection, analysis and dissemination of information about the occurrence, distribution and causes of cancer. His research interests have included skin cancer prevention; cancer screening; links between meat and bowel cancer; links between smoking, alcohol and cancer; and links between obesity and cancer. Just last week his research into links between obesity and a form of leukaemia received widespread media attention.

### **Public presentation details** (‘Cancer myths and facts’):

**Hobart:** Thursday 10 Nov., 12.30-1.30 pm, at Doherty Hadleys Hotel, 34 Murray St

**Launceston:** Thursday 10 Nov., 6-7 pm, at the Earlington Hotel, 3 Earl Street

**Devonport:** Friday 11 Nov., 12.30-1.30 pm, at the Devonport Entertainment and Convention Centre

## Some common cancer myths

**Myth:** I can't get cancer because I only smoke socially/smoke cigars/smoke light cigarettes.

**Fact:** There is no safe type of cigarette/cigar and no safe level of smoking. Obviously the more you smoke the greater your risk, but even people who have never smoked are at risk through breathing in other people's smoke. Passive smoking has been conclusively proven to cause lung cancer and nasal sinus cancer.

**Myth:** I can't get skin cancer because I don't burn – I tan.

**Fact:** Tanning without burning may cause DNA and skin damage leading to premature ageing and, potentially, skin cancer.

**Myth:** A glass of wine a day is good for my overall health.

**Fact:** Alcohol is a risk factor for cancers of the breast, mouth, pharynx, larynx, oesophagus and liver. While there is some evidence that a small amount of alcohol taken regularly may be protective against heart disease, there is no evidence that it provides any protection against cancer.

**Myth:** Artificial sweeteners cause cancer.

**Fact:** There is no evidence of this. Early studies of saccharin (no longer used) found increased bladder cancer in rats, but not in humans.

**Myth:** Some popular lipstick brand contain dangerous amount of lead, and can cause cancer.

**Fact:** There is no truth in this email rumour.

**Myth:** Stress causes cancer.

**Fact:** There is no good evidence linking stress with cancer.

## How can you minimise your cancer risk?

- avoid tobacco smoke
- protect your skin from the sun
- limit your alcohol intake
- maintain a healthy body weight through
  - regular physical activity
  - eating a healthy diet
- see a doctor if you notice any unusual body changes
- women:
  - have a Pap smear every two years
  - have a mammogram every two years (from the age of 50)

## Further information

**The Cancer Council's Helpline: 13 11 20**

### Reputable websites

The Cancer Council Australia - [www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)

Australian Government's Health Insite site (links to quality health information websites) –

[www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

American Cancer Society – [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

US National Cancer Institute – [www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet)

### Help in identifying Internet hoaxes

[www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com)