



Media Release

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Growth in cancer incidence to put pressure on health system

Australia would be unable to meet the needs of an unprecedented number of cancer patients unless planning for healthcare reform rapidly gathers pace, The Cancer Council said today.

Chief Executive Officer of The Cancer Council Australia, Professor Alan Coates and CEO of The Cancer Council Tasmania, Lawson Ride were responding to an Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report released today that predicts cancer incidence will rise from 88,398 in 2001 to 115,400 in 2011, an increase of 31 per cent.

Professor Coates said although the figures showed the underlying incidence rate of cancer after adjusting for age was relatively steady, both the absolute number of new cases and cancer prevalence (number of people alive after a diagnosis of cancer) in Australia would be markedly higher increasing demands on the health workforce.

Cancer Council Tasmania CEO Lawson Ride echoed Prof Coates's concern, saying that the predicted rise would have a flow-on effect on a state health system that was already under pressure.

"A 31 per cent national increase in the number of newly diagnosed cancer patients will have an impact on the state health system, so forward planning by Government is essential now to ensure that the health system can cope," Mr Ride said.

Currently, there are around 270,000 people in Australia living with cancer, a figure which is likely to exceed 350,000 by 2011.

Professor Coates said a commensurate investment in the cancer workforce, as well as structural reforms to the system, were needed to help ensure that growing numbers of cancer patients had equitable access to treatment and care. He said it was incongruous that the nation's most deadly disease only accounted for around 5.8 per cent of healthcare expenditure.

"Australia can take some pride in having one of the world's best case survival rates, but this is little comfort to the many thousands of patients who report feeling lost in the health system and at the mercy of a cancer care 'lottery'," Professor Coates said.

"Standardised models of multidisciplinary care, accreditation and credentialing processes to underwrite best practice and improved access to psychosocial support are high on the list of things that need to be built into the system to treat and support people faced with the distress of a cancer diagnosis."

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Professor Coates said The Cancer Council Australia applauded both the Federal Government and the Opposition for their cancer election commitments last year and welcomed the Government's subsequent budget initiatives this year.

"Cancer remains Australia's biggest killer and is clearly on the increase, so it is imperative that the trend we are seeing towards bipartisan political support for improved cancer control translates into a long-term commitment," he said.

"These AIHW projections, coupled with increased cancer prevalence, should motivate policy-makers at both the federal and state/territory levels to expedite plans to improve the health system to treat and care for cancer patients before their numbers reach critical mass."

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**For further information: Lawson Ride,
CEO
The Cancer Council Tasmania
Tel: 6233 2101 / 0418 129 757**