

# Impact of cancer in the workplace

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research



prevention



support



# Overview

- Context of cancer in the workplace
- Talking to your employee about cancer
- Managing the impact of cancer
- Creating cancer friendly workplaces
- Supporting a colleague with cancer
- Supporting working carers
- Death and bereavement
- Resources

# Why is this an important topic?

- > 40% of cancer cases occur in people of working age (18-65 years)
- Estimated **130,470** new cases of cancer will be diagnosed in Australia in 2016
- In NSW alone, 7.7 million sick days will be lost to prostate and breast cancer by 2022
- Increasing incidence, increasing survival – issues regarding productivity and continuing employment must be addressed
- Ability of employees with cancer and cancer survivors to continue working:
  - 67% of employees continue to work while undergoing treatment
  - 94% of carers continue to work
  - 10% of employees will not return to work after treatment for cancer
- A supportive workplace associated with higher rates of cancer survivors returning to work

# Talking to your employee about cancer

- Tailor your communication approach, be sensitive and let your employee guide the conversation. There may be reasons for reticence.
- Listening may help you learn more
- You don't need to solve it all in the first conversation – this is a fact finding session

## **Clarify:**

- Does the employee want colleagues to know about the diagnosis?
- Are they aware of leave entitlements?
- What time off are they likely to need?
- Do they want to keep working during treatment?

## **Avoid:**

- Sharing stories about other people with cancer you may have known
- Saying that everything will be okay
- Telling the employee to 'be positive'

**Resource: Talking to your employee about cancer: the first conversation**

# Managing the effects of cancer treatment

- **Treatment as the issue - not cancer itself**
- **Surgery:**
  - To the affected part of the body, usually the first step in the cancer treatment process
  - Can cause residual pain or change a person's appearance
- **Chemotherapy:**
  - IV drugs received at the hospital every 2 or 3 weeks, usually for 6-12 'cycles', approx. 4 hours per cycle
  - Symptoms worse in first week after chemo received, with gradual recovery afterward
- **Radiotherapy:**
  - Received daily, short bursts, usually after chemotherapy completed for 4-5 weeks
  - Machine delivered; burning pain common
- Longer term hospitalisation (eg. for complications, stem cell or bone marrow transplants)
- Steroids, anti-nausea, painkillers common

# Managing the effects of cancer treatment

## Common side effects of cancer treatment that may impact work

- Fatigue
- Nausea and vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Difficulty with concentration and memory
- Sadness or depression
- Increased risk of infection
- Hair loss

*'I had no idea that I would still be feeling tired five months after finishing treatment... I didn't know how to make it better and I was scared that's how it would be: that I wouldn't go back to normal, that I would never go back to having energy again.'*

Georgina, cancer patient

# Managing the effects of treatment

- Strategies that may be beneficial include:
  - Plan for absences
  - Flexible working hours
  - Modify employee's duties
  - Enable working from home
  - Employee plans work around when they have the most energy
  - Allow the employee to have rest breaks, as needed
  - Consider employee's workspace location
  - Access to Employee Assistance Program
  - Return to work coordinator
  - Encourage ill employees to stay at home until they are fully recovered
  - If your employee has to go home because s/he is unwell, ensure a safe trip home
- Your employee's circumstances may change so check in with the person at regular intervals once treatment begins

**Resource: Managing the effects of treatment**



# Creating cancer-friendly workplaces

- If policies or guidelines are not in place, develop and communicate a clear and accessible policy that covers employees affected by cancer
- Establish practical support strategies that can be tailored to an employee's unique situation, including:

## **Support during treatment**

- Flexible working arrangements
- Temporary adjustments to workload
- Additional leave
- Access to parking
- Access to counselling
- Encourage other employees to stay home when ill
- Help employees to find information and support including Cancer Council's workplace advice and financial planning services

## **Support after treatment**

- Return to work plan
- Ergonomic assessment of work space
- Buddy system
- Facilitate a gradual return to work
- Access to disabled bathroom facilities
- Sanitary and hazardous waste disposal



# Supporting a colleague with cancer

- Employees may experience fear, anxiety, guilt and disbelief
- It is natural to feel awkward or helpless, but one of the greatest benefits of the workplace is the emotional support provided by employers and colleagues
- Some helpful tips include:
  - Be available to listen
  - Ask whether the person wants to discuss the cancer and respect their response
  - Acknowledge that life can be unfair
  - Every now and then, ask how the person is feeling that day
  - Respect the person's privacy
  - Don't assure the person that 'everything will be okay' / 'not to worry' or to be positive
  - Stay in touch; nominate a 'buddy' to maintain the flow of good wishes and information
  - Offer to do something practical (eg. cooking a meal, driving the person to treatment)
  - Try to keep the way you interact as normal as possible (avoid smothering with concern)
  - Talk about topics other than cancer
  - Try to be patient and understanding if the person is not able to work as efficiently

# Supporting working carers

- Carers often experience higher levels of distress than the person with cancer
- Replacement value of caregivers for two years post diagnosis estimated at \$47K (Yabroff & Kim, 2009)
- Carers may be reluctant to tell their employers about their caring responsibilities because they fear it may negatively affect their employment; a supportive workplace can make it easier
- Ways to provide support are the same as supporting employees who have cancer
- Employers should refer to the National Employment Standards (2010) for carer's leave entitlements

## Resource: Supporting Working Carers

[www.cancercouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Supporting\\_Working\\_Carers-Apr14.pdf](http://www.cancercouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Supporting_Working_Carers-Apr14.pdf)



# Death and bereavement

- Poor prognosis - Develop and implement a communications plan
- Communications can help prepare staff & reducing shock
- Each employee's response to death and way of grieving will be unique
- As soon as practical break the news to immediate colleagues
- Don't be afraid to admit that you don't know what to say
- Make sure staff members know about any support services available (EAP)
- Keep them informed about funeral arrangements
- Assure staff they can come to you with any questions
- Discuss with the team how they might like to remember and honour their colleague
- Take time to deal with your own feelings

# Information and support resources

- Cancer Council 13 11 20 Information and Support
- Cancer Council's probono legal and financial planning referral programs
- Cancer, Work & You booklet
- Understanding Surgery, Understanding Chemotherapy, Understanding Radiotherapy booklets Cancer Council series of online workplace resources  
<https://www.cancersa.org.au/get-support/health-professionals/find-resources>
- Workplace fact sheets  
[www.cancerCouncil.com.au/cancer-information/for-workplaces-employers/](http://www.cancerCouncil.com.au/cancer-information/for-workplaces-employers/)
- Cancer Council SA cancer and work videos  
[www.cancersa.org.au/information/a-z-index/cancer-and-work](http://www.cancersa.org.au/information/a-z-index/cancer-and-work)
  - Sherri's story: working after a cancer diagnosis
  - Annette's story: supporting an employee through cancer
- Cancer Council NSW webinar series  
[www.cancerCouncil.com.au/55365/get-support/coping-with-cancer/online-support-multimedia-resources/working-beyond-cancer/](http://www.cancerCouncil.com.au/55365/get-support/coping-with-cancer/online-support-multimedia-resources/working-beyond-cancer/)