

Supporting People with Cancer Return to Work in Disadvantaged Communities

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Background

Cancer survivors are more likely to be unemployed than healthy controls and the risk of unemployment increases with lower socioeconomic status (Mehnert et al, 2013). According to the Atlas of Cancer in South Australia, areas of economic disadvantage often correlate with areas of poor cancer outcomes in metropolitan as well as regional South Australia. Maintenance of employment has substantial benefits to an individual in enhancing a sense of personal worth and identity as well as providing financial security (De Boer et al, 2009).

Aims

This project aims to

- improve return to work (RTW) of cancer survivors by developing a suite of resources that support survivors RTW with particular emphasis on disadvantaged communities;
- disseminate these resources widely via Cancer Council Australia's existing Wiki-platform and other relevant networks; and
- increase stakeholder engagement in the development of practical tools, including pathways for referral and key recommendations to support survivors and stakeholders navigate RTW processes.

Methodology

This project will undertake the following steps:

- Conduct a review of existing resources and recent literature in programs and resources to support people with cancer return to work to identify gaps and areas of need;
- Consult with cancer survivors, health professionals working with cancer patients, and experts in return to work via focus groups across South Australia to identify unmet needs and barriers, particularly among disadvantaged communities;
- Convene an Expert Consensus Forum to review all data and inform the creation of new resources; and
- Create a suite of new resources to support people with cancer return to work, to be published on a wiki-platform on the Cancer Council Australia website.



Literature Review Results

The aim of this review is to gain a greater understanding of interventions to enhance return to work for cancer survivors, and compare these with return to work interventions for non-cancer settings. A 2011 Cochrane Review on RTW interventions in cancer was identified (De Boer et al 2011), and the literature search focused on any RTW interventions for cancer and non-cancer illnesses. The initial search in the electronic databases identified 19350 references; 23 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review.

As indicated in the table on the right, no Australian studies were identified in this review for either cancer or non-cancer RTW interventions. Results for both groups were mixed, with some studies showing interventions enhanced RTW while others had no effect.

	Cancer	Non-cancer settings
Number of studies	Five	Eighteen
Study designs and sample sizes	Controlled (randomised and non-randomised) and cohort studies - usually small sizes (n<100), sometimes limited statistical significance	Controlled (randomised) and cohort studies – range of sample sizes (up to n>400), sometimes limited statistical significance
Types of RTW interventions	Physical, Psychological, Social, Vocational	Physical, Psychological, Social, Vocational
Study outcomes	Mixed conclusions: some interventions enhanced RTW while others had no effect	Mixed conclusions: some interventions enhanced RTW while others had no effect
Australian studies	None	None

Expected Outcomes

This project will result in the development of a suite of return to work resources comprised of key evidence-based recommendations, practical resources and tools presented as a series of digital modules accessed via Cancer Council Australia's existing wiki-platform. Modules will be tailored to address the diverse cancer-related return to work needs identified for disadvantaged consumer groups, with resources provided for consumers, oncology professionals, general practitioners and employers. It will also lead to a greater understanding of the support needs of disadvantaged communities with regards to return to employment and increase engagement of stakeholders within the area of support for return to employment.



References

- de Boer AG, Taskila T, Ojajarvi A, van Dijk FJ, Verbeek JH. (2009) Cancer survivors and unemployment: a meta-analysis and meta-regression. *JAMA*, 301: 753-762.
- Mehnert, A., de Boer, A. and Feuerstein, M. (2013), Employment challenges for cancer survivors. *Cancer*, 119: 2151-2159
- de Boer AG, Taskila T, Tamminga SJ, Frings-Dresen MH, Feuerstein M, Verbeek JH. (2011) Interventions to enhance return-to-work for cancer patients. *The Cochrane database of systematic reviews*. 2011(2):CD007569