

Oncology

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Definition

The general practice management of cancer involves caring for people with cancer and their carers over the entire spectrum of cancer control including:

- primary prevention such as smoking cessation, and providing other behavioural advice about diet, weight control, physical activity and sun protection
- promoting and contributing to the delivery of national cancer screening programs for cervical, breast and colorectal cancer
- early detection, investigation, referral and management of symptomatic cancer and appropriate management of symptoms of potential oncological significance
- contributing to care during active treatment, in some cases through direct involvement in care delivery or in other instances through care coordination
- psychological support of patients and families throughout the patient's cancer journey
- early detection and management of recurrence of cancer or side effects of treatment including, ongoing monitoring following treatment and, when appropriate, remission
- early detection and understanding for urgent management of cancer related emergencies such as neutropaenic sepsis, spinal cord compression, deep venous thrombosis and pulmonary emboli, and
- palliation of symptoms associated with the disease and its treatment.

Rationale

Cancer is responsible for nearly 20% of the total burden of disease in Australia as measured by death and disability.¹

Malignant neoplasms account for 2.18 out of every 100 general practice encounters, with skin cancers accounting for 1.07 of these encounters.² The rate of general practice cancer related services is increasing.³

Skin cancers, including basal and squamous cell carcinomas and melanomas, are the most common cancers managed by general practitioners. The next most common cancers are prostate cancer, female breast cancer and lung cancer.⁴

Excluding nonmelanocytic skin cancers, around 101 000 new cases of cancer (55 000 males and 46 000 females) were diagnosed in Australia in 2006.⁵ Over 370 000 people are diagnosed with nonmelanocytic cancers each year.¹

More than half the population will develop at least one nonmelanocytic skin cancer, and 1 in 3 men and 1 in 4 women will develop a major cancer before aged 75 years.¹ Although survival rates are improving, cancer accounts for nearly 38 000 deaths per year.⁴

The most common cancers in Australia, excluding nonmelanocytic skin cancers, are prostate, colorectal, lung and melanoma in men, and breast, colorectal, melanoma and lung in women.

Australia's overall cancer death rates declined by about 14% in 1986–2004 and these rates are low when compared with other Western countries, however, despite these improvements, cancer is now Australia's leading cause of death among 45–64 year olds and causes more premature deaths and overall disease burden than cardiovascular disease.

Refer also to curriculum statements: *Chronic diseases*, *Palliative care*, and *Population health*.

The five domains of general practice – oncology

Communication skills and the patient-doctor relationship

Patient centred approaches help develop strong relationships with patients and their families to help provide support during the diagnosis and long term management of cancer. Specific communication skills include the ability to:

- break bad news
- discuss and explain management issues from a patient centred perspective
- discuss the patient-doctor relationship openly to restore any loss in confidence that may have occurred due to a diagnosis of cancer⁶
- identify and manage psychosocial problems associated with the diagnosis and management of cancer
- work effectively within a multidisciplinary team
- recognise the importance of care coordination and to act in a coordinating role if this is appropriate and desired by the patient and care team
- discuss cancer risk and approaches to reducing risk and initiating behavioural change
- discuss the advantages and disadvantages of specific cancer screening tests and the interpretation of these tests, and
- empower patients to ask their oncologists about issues that are important for them such as prognosis and quality of life.

Applied professional knowledge and skills

Cancer care in general practice requires a diverse range of knowledge and skills including:

- understanding the role of lifestyle factors in contributing to cancer (smoking, exposure to UV radiation, poor diet, insufficient physical activity and excessive alcohol consumption), the extent to which lifestyle modification may reduce cancer risk and the ability to assist patients in such lifestyle modification
- assisting patients to quit smoking
- demonstrate the ability to perform skin checks and manage suspicious skin lesions
- obtain smoking and alcohol history and record this in the patient file
- monitor and record body mass index as part of cancer risk assessment
- identify individuals at increased risk of cancer due to familial, behavioural or environmental risk factors
- understand the familial factors involved in increased risk of certain cancers
- use a three generation family history to identify patients who are at increased risk of cancer
- an awareness of National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and Australian Cancer Network guidelines on identifying those at increased familial risk, and the role of surveillance programs, specific interventions and familial cancer clinics
- knowledge of evidence based programs for the early detection of cancer
- demonstrating the skills required to perform Pap tests with attention to quality assurance issues such as sterilisation of equipment and follow up of abnormal smears
- knowledge of the presentation, diagnosis and management of common cancers in general practice
- the ability to recognise significant symptoms that could be related to cancer and the appropriate pathways for investigation and referral of cancer
- broad understanding of the principles of management of common cancers, including side effects of common treatments, potential interactions, and how to access specialised knowledge when needed
- an awareness of, and ability to, access information resources for patients to assist in their understanding of cancer and/or potential treatments
- knowledge of the potential psychosocial sequelae of cancer affecting people with cancer and their carers, as well as management of such issues and awareness of available support services

- the ability to identify those at risk and those with psychosocial problems and awareness of evidence based guidelines, and
- the ability to obtain vital information from oncologists to help facilitate their patient's regaining control over management decisions that affect their quality of life such as prognosis, understand reasons for treatment pathway choices, manage common side effects, accurate and understandable information about cancer trials they may be involved with, and explore the lived experiences for their cancer patients with empathy and validation.^{7,8}

Population health and the context of general practice

A broad understanding of the epidemiology of common cancers in Australia, and particularly the role of risk factor modification and early detection of asymptomatic cancers, is central to the role of general practice in reducing the impact of cancer in the community.

This includes:

- an awareness that tobacco smoking is the leading cause of cancer and of the range of cancers for which tobacco contributes, as well as options to facilitate quitting
- an awareness of the relationship between ultraviolet radiation exposure and skin cancers
- an understanding of the evidence supporting the role of increased fruit and vegetables, increasing physical activity, maintaining a health body weight and limiting or avoiding alcohol in reducing the risk of certain cancers
- an awareness of current evidence based guidelines relating to healthy diet, physical activity and alcohol intake and ability to assist patients in adopting preventive lifestyle behaviours
- an awareness of biological risk factors for cancer, including viruses such as hepatitis B and human papilloma virus (HPV)
- knowledge about the evidence for, and current guidelines relating to, screening tests for cervical, breast and colorectal cancer including their pros and cons, appropriate use and follow up of abnormal screening tests
- having a broad understanding of cancer screening principles
- being familiar with the role of general practitioners in the national screening programs (eg. National Bowel Cancer Screening Program 2006), including the significance and management of a positive faecal occult blood test
- being aware of the complex issues surrounding testing for the early detection of prostate cancer and of the guidelines of organisations such as the Cancer Council Australia and the RACGP, and
- being able to describe the various community and consumer resources available for people and their families affected by cancer.

Professional and ethical role

General practitioners require a professional and patient centred approach to enable them to support patients across the spectrum of cancer control activities. General practitioners need to:

- be able and prepared to act as a patient advocate when appropriate
- recognise the importance of patient autonomy and respecting patients' choices when involved in making often complex treatment and management decisions which may include the decision to decline treatment
- support the patient's carers while maintaining the patient's right to confidentiality
- recognise the ethical issues associated with early detection of asymptomatic cancer
- liaise effectively with oncologists
- work professionally within a multidisciplinary team, and
- utilise evidence based guidelines to assist in the care of patients.

Organisational and legal dimensions

The general practitioner needs to:

- be aware of, and be able to, access relevant clinical guidelines for the prevention, early detection and care of cancer
- be aware of information sources for patients and carers
- maintain adequate clinical records and ensure appropriate follow up of significant symptoms that could be related to cancer
- be able to identify people at risk of cancer and utilise practice information systems to facilitate appropriate screening and surveillance
- be familiar with the legal requirements of power of attorney and advanced treatment directives
- be aware of appropriate referral pathways for people with cancer within the local network, and
- be aware of local support services for people with cancer and their carers.

Learning objectives across the GP professional life

Medical student

Communication skills and the patient-doctor relationship

- Describe the use of patient centred approaches to breaking bad news.
- Describe the use of patient centred approaches to communicating cancer risk information and promoting healthy behaviours.

Applied professional knowledge and skills

- Be able to perform a basic history and examination to assess symptoms associated with cancer.
- Describe the usual presentations of common cancers.

Population health and the context of general practice

- Describe the different national cancer screening programs.
- Be able to conduct basic assessment of environmental, lifestyle and familial cancer risks.

Professional and ethical role

- Outline the role of the GP within the multidisciplinary team that cares for people with cancer.
- Outline the role of the GP as a patient advocate.

Organisational and legal dimensions

- Outline the role of the GP in delivering cancer screening programs.
- Describe the importance of maintaining adequate clinical records and follow up of patients with symptoms that could be related to cancer.

Learning objectives across the GP professional life

Prevocational doctor

Assumed level of knowledge – medical student

Communication skills and the patient-doctor relationship

- Recognise the psychological impact of a cancer diagnosis on patients and their families and demonstrate approaches to breaking bad news.

Applied professional knowledge and skills

- Conduct a detailed assessment of cancer risk and provide basic advice on behaviour change to reduce risk.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the presentation, diagnosis and management of common cancers in general practice.
- Have a basic understanding of the management of common cancers and its side effects.
- Demonstrate appropriate investigation of symptoms associated with cancer.

Population health and the context of general practice

- Implement the different national cancer screening programs in the hospital situation and be competent in conducting a Pap test and rectal examination as part of cervical and prostate cancer screening.

Professional and ethical role

- Describe the importance of patient autonomy and the respect for patient's choices when involved in complex decisions about their health care.
- Demonstrate how to work professionally within a multidisciplinary team.

Organisational and legal dimensions

- Outline appropriate referral pathways for people with cancer.
- Outline the importance of local support services for people with cancer and their carers.

Learning objectives across the GP professional life

Vocational registrar

Assumed level of knowledge – prevocational doctor

Communication Skills and the patient-doctor relationship

- Demonstrate the ability to apply patient centred communication skills to support behaviour change to reduce cancer risk.
- Demonstrate how to discuss different cancer screening tests and programs to support patients' informed choices.
- Demonstrate an ability to discuss the importance of general practice care during and after active treatment of cancer.
- Demonstrate the ability to communicate with patients and their families/carers about management, informed decisions and emotional issues.

Applied professional knowledge and skills

- Describe the management of common cancers and recognition and management of side effects of treatment.
- Demonstrate how to apply patient centred care to manage the complex psychosocial issues of patients and families affected by a diagnosis of cancer.
- Recognise and apply evidence based management for the assessment of symptoms associated with cancer.

Population health and the context of general practice

- Demonstrate awareness of new cancer screening programs.
- Describe the advantages and disadvantages of different cancer screening tests available in Australia.

Professional and ethical role

- Describe the ethical issues associated with early detection of asymptomatic cancer.
- Demonstrate use of evidence based guidelines to assist in the care of patients with cancer or those with symptoms related to cancer.
- Describe the role of the GP as patient advocate for people with cancer and their carers.

Organisational and legal dimensions

- Describe appropriate referral pathways for people with cancer or symptoms related to cancer.
- Discuss the use of relevant clinical guidelines for the prevention, early detection and care of cancer.
- Outline information sources for patients with cancer and their carers.
- Describe the use of practice information systems to facilitate cancer screening and surveillance.

Learning objectives across the GP professional life

Continuing professional development

Assumed level of knowledge – vocational registrar

Communication skills and the patient-doctor relationship

- Demonstrate keeping up-to-date with communication skills acquisition research in cancer related areas.
- Describe approaches to empower patients to ask their oncologists questions about their cancer care.

Applied professional knowledge and skills

- Be able to identify gaps in knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to evidence based cancer care and prevention.
- Demonstrate keeping up-to-date with managing side effects of patients' treatments and cancer emergencies.

Population health and the context of general practice

- Make an undertaking to access ongoing professional development in relation to their identified knowledge gaps in cancer care and prevention.
- Make an undertaking to regularly update knowledge and skill base in the light of any new and emerging evidence in cancer care and prevention.

Professional and ethical role

- Demonstrate the role as patient advocate.
- Demonstrate support to patients in making informed decisions about cancer screening and their care.

Organisational and legal dimensions

- Demonstrate use of evidence based guidelines for the prevention, early detection and care of cancer.
- Maintain adequate clinical records and ensure appropriate follow up of significant symptoms that could be related to cancer.
- Demonstrate the ability to identify people at risk of cancer and utilise practice information systems to facilitate appropriate screening and surveillance including recall systems.
- Use local support services to improve the care of people with cancer and their carers.

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