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When a **staff member** has cancer

If a staff member in your school has been diagnosed with cancer, it can affect every aspect of their life, including their employment. The staff member may have to take extended leave from work, and could need support from the school community during and after treatment.



How cancer affects the staff member

Work is an important part of life for most people – besides income, working at school may provide satisfaction, enjoyable challenges and a chance to mix with people from different age groups and backgrounds.

When one of your colleagues is diagnosed with cancer, they have to make many decisions:

Who to tell – Some people may decide they want to keep their diagnosis private. Their wishes should be respected (see *Respecting privacy*, page 13). Others are happy for students and parents to know, or they may wish to tell only a few people such as the principal, a staff support officer or colleagues they are close to. You should not share information about a colleague's health without their consent.

How to say it – A person with cancer may choose to make a personal announcement, but they might prefer to use another method, such as writing a letter or asking the principal to tell colleagues.

Plan of action – While some people may continue working, others may take time off or retire. Flexible working arrangements can sometimes help to accommodate treatment side effects (see pages 8–9).

Many school staff are also parents, and this adds to their stress when they have cancer. They will probably be preoccupied with managing changes at home and may need particular understanding from their workplace.

Choosing to tell parents and students

Although a staff member is not obligated to tell parents and students about their diagnosis, they may choose to share some information. This can be particularly helpful in smaller communities, where the staff member may be confronted with questions about their absence if they run into students and parents at the shops or other local places.

The staff member should discuss how to tell the school community with the appropriate colleagues, such as the school principal, counsellor, student wellbeing team and/or staff wellbeing officer.

Most parents will appreciate a straightforward approach. Parents can be contacted by letter, email or phone; a parent group such as the P&C or P&F could be asked to relay the news; or parents can be invited to a meeting.

Help with decisions

If your colleague has been diagnosed with cancer, they may feel overwhelmed and ask for help with the many decisions they must make. You can remind them of any professional counselling services, such as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), that are available to staff through the school.

Your colleague can also call Cancer Council **13 11 20** for a free copy of the *Cancer, Work & You* booklet, or they can download it from their local Cancer Council website.



Keeping in touch with the teacher

Students may like to:

- prepare get well cards
- draw pictures
- write a story
- send a letter or email describing what they've been doing in class
- make a video of students sending get well messages
- start a blog to keep the teacher up to date with news from the classroom.

It's a good idea to explain to parents how the school plans to maintain the students' schedules.

Telling students requires a sensitive approach. Remember, students come from all types of backgrounds, so some of them may not know much about cancer and others may have a personal experience with it. A young person's age and maturity also affect their level of understanding.

Plan what to say to students in advance (using words the students will understand) and prepare answers to any likely questions. It is wise to send a letter or email home to parents so they know that their children might want to talk about their teacher's cancer. Any letter should include contact details for appropriate support services and resources.

How people may react

When people in your school community learn about a colleague's cancer, there will be a variety of reactions. Some people will ask questions or be extremely helpful; others will pretend they don't know or will go out of their way to avoid the person with cancer.

On rare occasions, there may be parents who will make it clear they don't want their child in the class of a teacher who has cancer because they believe their child's schooling will be disrupted. In this situation, it will be helpful for the principal to explain how long the teacher will be away and how their work will be managed.

If any member of your school community reacts in an insensitive manner to the news of the diagnosis, or how the school plans to manage the absence, the person with cancer should speak to the principal or staff wellbeing officer.

The principal can assist students and parents who want to find out more about cancer or would like to access counselling services. See pages 65–69 for a list of reliable organisations and websites.

“Some of my colleagues were so uncomfortable they didn't even talk about it. I don't think they had a lack of concern, I just think they had no idea what to say.”

Shirley, secondary schoolteacher with cancer



How parents can help

If parents are aware of your colleague's cancer, they might offer to help in various ways. The school could appoint a contact person to manage these offers. The contact person can check what sort of help the colleague would like from parents and then coordinate the support.

Depending on school policy, a parent's assistance in the classroom may be helpful at this time. The principal can clarify whether this is allowed and what clearances (e.g. Working with Children Check) are needed, and the teacher can decide if it would be welcome.

Many teachers have their own personal support network outside the school community and may prefer to keep their professional and personal lives separate. However, others gratefully accept offers such as a meal roster or help with their own children.

If a teacher with cancer does not want direct support, you can check whether they would be happy for your school to host a general cancer awareness or fundraising event (see pages 34–35 and 46–47).

Cancer in the workplace

About two-thirds of employees continue to work while undergoing cancer treatment.⁷ Whether or not a person is able to work depends on their position, type of cancer treatment and prognosis.

As more people are diagnosed in early stages – and as survival rates and treatments improve – it is increasingly likely that an employee will return to work after treatment or continue to work during treatment in some capacity. A supportive work environment is positively associated with the likelihood that a cancer survivor will resume their employment.

School staff returning to work are often anxious about how they will manage cancer-related fatigue, employer expectations, and changes in their workload, productivity and relationships with colleagues and students.

To find out more about providing a supportive and fair work environment, call Cancer Council 13 11 20 and ask for the Workplace Fact Sheets, or check your local Cancer Council website. The fact sheets cover topics such as *Managing the effects of treatment*, *Creating cancer-friendly workplaces* and *Supporting a colleague with cancer*.

Rights at work

For more information about employees' rights at work, you can:

- contact your local education authority (see pages 68–69)
- visit the Australian Government workplace and employee relations website, fairwork.gov.au
- call Cancer Council **13 11 20** or visit your local Cancer Council website.



Taking a break

The hardest part is going for tests. I had constant tests – three-month tests, different scans, doctors' appointments. It takes it out of you. I would try to do it all in one day, so I didn't have to take too much time off school, but it was exhausting. I ended up deciding to take six months off. The administration was supportive of my decision.

Susan, primary schoolteacher with cancer

Dealing with side effects

People diagnosed with cancer or undergoing treatment often experience side effects such as nausea, vomiting and fatigue. Long-term physical changes might be visible, such as the loss of a limb, but they can also be less obvious, such as loss of strength or diminished vision.

Cancer treatment sometimes causes temporary cognitive impairment, such as short-term memory loss or difficulty concentrating. People can usually manage these cognitive difficulties by getting extra sleep, making to-do lists and avoiding situations where quick thinking might be required.

The school community can help by being patient and understanding. A person who has had cancer treatment may not be as efficient as they once were for some time, but can usually make a successful transition back to work if the environment is supportive.

The role of the principal

Initial support

When a staff member informs the principal that they have cancer, they need a sensitive and sympathetic response. Aside from worrying about work, the person may be making several difficult personal decisions. The principal can remind them of any staff counselling services, such as the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), that they and their family members can use.

If the person is newly diagnosed, they may feel like they are being bombarded with information. Rather than adding to this 'information overload' in the initial conversation, the principal might want to set up a meeting at a later time and come prepared with relevant material, such as detailed information about working arrangements and leave entitlements.

It is important for the principal to respect a staff member's preferences about how much they would like to disclose about their cancer, and who they would like to tell.

Many people with cancer find it helpful to talk to someone in a similar situation. If there is another staff member with cancer, the principal could put the employees in touch with one another (with their permission). Another option is for the staff member to contact someone with a similar experience through Cancer Council. They can call 13 11 20 and ask about Cancer Connect, the telephone peer support service, or explore the online community of Cancer Connections at cancerconnections.com.au.

The principal can provide advice and guidance regarding changes to a staff member's work schedule. The staff member may consider taking a break, changing their workload or arranging a flexible work schedule. The principal can help the staff member make these decisions in line with leave and relief staffing procedures. They should also consider how to reduce the impact on students. For example, organising a single relief teacher can maintain continuity for students during extended absences.

Return to work

By law, employers must make reasonable adjustments for an employee affected by cancer or its treatment. These may involve physical adjustments, such as access to disabled bathroom facilities, or adjustments to workload.

When a staff member returns to work after a long absence, the principal should arrange a return-to-work meeting. With input from the staff member's health care team, they can develop a written return-to-work plan that outlines the adjustments and establishes a timeline. This makes the situation clear for all involved and can help prevent misunderstanding among colleagues.

There are several ways to reduce an employee's anxiety and help them during their transition back to work. These can include:

- specifying regular meetings in the return-to-work plan to help the person manage their workload and talk about any concerns they may have (such as job security)
- adjusting their work schedule and load as agreed in the return-to-work plan
- making necessary physical adjustments
- liaising with other staff (being a contact person or coordinating offers of help)
- taking a proactive role in liaising with parents and students, if appropriate
- offering counselling/EAP support for the person and their family
- supporting the employee's decisions and offering reassurance.

When a family member has cancer

The information in this chapter may also be helpful if a colleague's partner, child or parent is diagnosed with cancer. The colleague is likely to need time off work to care for their family member. If the treatment hospital is a long way from home, they may require particular flexibility.

Working carers must juggle many demands alongside their workplace responsibilities. A supportive work environment can help them manage. Call Cancer Council **13 11 20** and ask for the *Supporting working carers* fact sheet, or check your local Cancer Council website.



Chapter checklist

- ✓ The staff member with cancer decides who to tell – there is no legal obligation to share their diagnosis.
- ✓ Before telling students, discuss with the principal and other key staff and possibly send a letter home to parents.
- ✓ Explain to parents how the school will maintain continuity for students.
- ✓ Teachers with cancer may need a lighter load and flexible working arrangements.
- ✓ The principal's role involves creating a cancer-friendly workplace while minimising any impact on student learning programs and on the broader school community.

Supporting other colleagues

When an employee is diagnosed with cancer, the principal can help to address any concerns that other staff may have. The staff member with cancer may ask the principal to liaise with colleagues on their behalf. Support should be offered to employees who are upset. If your school offers an EAP, staff can be referred to this service.

If an employee has to take a leave of absence, the principal can work with colleagues to organise substitutes for the absent employee. Most colleagues are likely to be flexible and accommodating, but a temporary substitute or permanent replacement may need to be arranged.

Supporting students and families

A staff member may wish to inform parents or students about their cancer diagnosis, but may be uncomfortable standing up in front of the class or calling parents to relay the news. The principal can offer support by coordinating how the information is shared. They can also liaise with any parents who are concerned and explain how the school will maintain the students' continuity of education during the staff member's absence.

It is also important for the principal to talk to students regularly to assure them that the school is supporting their teacher and to let them know if their teacher will be taking time off. Principals can also remind students that school staff are available to support them.