

# Election Priorities 2007

## Cancer control plan for Indigenous Australians



The Cancer Council Australia calls on the next Australian Government to develop and implement a national strategy to improve cancer control in Indigenous people.

### **Why cancer in Indigenous Australians should be a priority**

Evidence shows Indigenous Australians with cancer are twice as likely to die within five years of diagnosis as non-Indigenous Australians with cancer.<sup>1</sup>

While research on cancer in Indigenous people is limited – which reflects the low priority given to cancer control in Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders – there are important indications of why cancer treatment outcomes for Indigenous people are so much poorer those for non-Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous Australians smoke at around 2½ times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians (with 80% smoking prevalence in some communities), causing disproportionately high incidence of the comparatively high-mortality cancers attributed to smoking. Indigenous people also participate at significantly lower rates in screening programs and are far more likely to present for diagnosis with an advanced cancer and to decline treatment.<sup>2,3</sup>

### **A national, cooperative approach**

In August 2004, The Cancer Council Australia convened Australia's first ever national discussion forum on cancer control in Indigenous Australians.<sup>4</sup>

Over two days the forum explored the reasons for poor cancer outcomes in Indigenous Australians across the spectrum from primary prevention to palliative care. Leading clinical and public health experts, Aboriginal community leaders and Indigenous people with cancer agreed on a range of measures needed as part of a national strategy to reduce the impact of cancer in Indigenous people, including:

- A strategy developed in close consultation with Indigenous groups, such as the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation;
- A significantly increased commitment and national plan to reduce smoking in Indigenous people;
- Increased research to better understand cancer control in Indigenous communities and develop more culturally appropriate responses;
- Fast-tracking of cervical cancer immunisation to girls in Indigenous communities;
- Strategies to increase Indigenous participation in cancer screening programs; and
- Strategies to reduce hepatitis infection in Indigenous communities to prevent liver cancer.

The next Australian Government must recognise that cancer is a leading cause of death in Indigenous people and take the lead in developing a national strategy to improve cancer control in Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> Condon JR, Barnes A, Cunningham J, Armstrong BK, Long-term trends in cancer mortality for Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory, Medical Journal Australia, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Department of Health and Ageing, Principles of practice, standards and guidelines for providers of cervical screening services for Indigenous women, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Condon JR, Barnes A, Armstrong BA, Selva-Nayagam S, Elwood M. Stage at diagnosis and cancer survival of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, 1991-2000, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Lowenthal R, Grogan P, Kerrins E, Reducing the impact of cancer in Indigenous communities, conference report, Medical Journal of Australia.