

General Practice support for Bowel Cancer Screening

Bowel cancer poses a significant public health problem in Australia, with over 70 people dying each week. In Victoria in 2008, nearly 3600 people were diagnosed and over 1400 people died of bowel cancer.

The NHMRC Clinical Practice Guidelines and RACGP Red Book recommend that men and women aged 50 and over, without symptoms and without a strong family history of bowel cancer, complete a Faecal Occult Blood Test (FOBT) every two years. Regular screening using an FOBT can reduce the number of deaths from bowel cancer by up to 30%. Survival from bowel cancer is dependant on the stage of the cancer at diagnosis, with 90% of bowel cancers being curable if detected at the earliest stage.

The National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP) received a permanent funding commitment in the May 2011 federal budget. People turning 50, 55 or 65 from 1 January 2011 are eligible for a free FOBT.

General Practice support of the NBCSP is integral to its success, including helping patients make informed decisions about participation, arranging follow-up tests for patients with positive FOBT results, completing patient information, and returning it to the central register.

In a study by Salkeld et alⁱ, 94% of the respondents either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' they would screen for bowel cancer if their General Practitioner recommended the test.

In addition, a study by Zajac et alⁱⁱ, shows that advocacy of screening by GPs significantly improves initial uptake, as well as ongoing participation in FOBT screening for colorectal cancer.

These and many other studies highlight the significance of a credible and trusted source such as a GP or primary care practice, in endorsing bowel screening through FOBT.

General Practice is also encouraged to inform those who are not eligible for the NBCSP but are aged 50+, to participate in regular screening for bowel cancer, by establishing recall and tracking systems through Medical Director, and advising patients of alternative FOBT suppliers, such as pharmacies.

Alternatively, Victorian residents can be directed to Cancer Council Victoria's HelpLine on 13 11 20 or www.cancervic.org.au/fobt to buy an InSure FOBT for a reduced price of \$30 (or \$22 with a pension or health card).

Screening programs work best when systems are set up to support them, and Cancer Council Victoria provides resources, education, training and support for General Practice. Visit <http://www.cancervic.org.au/for-health-professionals/gp-program> or contact Kate Plant on 9635 5227 or Kate.Plant@cancervic.org.au for resources or further information on how we can support your bowel cancer prevention efforts.

For queries about the NBCSP, including information, forms and resources, call the Information Line on 1800 118 868 or visit the website at www.cancerscreening.gov.au.

ⁱ Salkeld G.P., Solomon M.J., Short L, Ward J. Measuring the importance of attributes that influence consumer attitudes to colorectal cancer screening. ANZ J. Surg. 2003; **73**: 128–132

ⁱⁱ Zajac I.T., Whibley A.H., Cole S.R., Byrne D., Guy J., Morcom J., Young G.P. Endorsement by the primary care practitioner consistently improves participation in screening for colorectal cancer: a longitudinal analysis. J Med Screen 2010; **17**:19–24