

TACKLING BOWEL CANCER

Australia has one of the highest incidences of bowel cancer in the world and it now is the most commonly diagnosed new internal cancer in Australia.

Over 10,000 new cases are diagnosed in Australians each year and almost half die from the disease annually. This is more than twice the number of people who die of breast cancer and three times the number who die in road traffic accidents. It is non-discriminatory affecting males and females equally and although only 10% of cases occur below the age of 50, adults of any age can develop the disease.

These distressing statistics can however be dramatically improved as we have the capacity to diagnose the disease at an early stage and can even prevent it with the potential to save many lives. Community education is vital and for this reason "Tackling Bowel Cancer" has been established to help educate Australians about the major risk of bowel cancer and possible preventative measures. This theme was chosen as it acknowledges the great tackling strength of Trevor Barker, former captain of the St Kilda Football Club who died of the disease at age 39.

The aims of Tackling Bowel Cancer are:

- To demystify bowel cancer and to increase awareness of bowel cancer as a major public health issue.
- To improve awareness of the environmental and genetic factors which influence the development of bowel cancer.
- To improve awareness of the symptoms and signs of bowel cancer.
- To improve awareness and attitudes on detection, investigation and treatment of bowel cancer.
- To promote support for bowel cancer research.

The "Tackling Bowel Cancer" campaign was successfully launched at the Cornerstone Lecture Series at Cabrini in July 2002 with Mr Hugh Morgan AC endorsed as the patron of the campaign. The Cabrini Monash University Academic Surgical Department has been actively promoting the program with a Community Seminar in November 2002 and various media exposures. It is hoped that the campaign will develop along the lines of overseas programs such as Beating Bowel Cancer in the United Kingdom and Confronting Colon Cancer in the USA where NBC Today Host Katie Couric has become the public face of colon cancer in her efforts to raise public awareness.

Early diagnosis of bowel cancer and its precursor (*bowel polyps*) require community screening - with or without bowel symptoms.

Screening for bowel cancer for those with average risk (*in Australia that is a 5% life time chance*) is important although the best way to do this is still being determined. Testing the faeces regularly for occult blood is associated with an improved chance of survival from bowel cancer. Colonoscopy however is the most sensitive way to diagnosis polyps and cancer. The factors associated with cost and safety as well as manpower to do the examination for a whole asymptomatic community is problematic. It could be argued however that for the average person a baseline colonoscopy examination at age fifty followed by faecal occult blood testing regularly and then perhaps another colonoscopy at 10 years and five yearly thereafter might be reasonable. Certainly for individuals in a high-

risk category (*such as a family history of bowel cancer*) regular colonoscopy every three to five years is appropriate.

A new screening tool being evaluated is virtual colonoscopy (*CT colonography*). Research is being carried out to determine how sensitive this technique is for detection of polyps. Another promising area is the detection of DNA in the faeces. Bowel tumours tend to shed DNA and this can be readily identified but the test needs refining. The use of chemo preventative agents such as aspirin to inhibit the growth of polyps and therefore prevent bowel cancer is also being investigated.

Lifestyle choices are important factors in guarding against bowel cancer with diet playing an important part. A diet with less animal fat and animal protein with more vegetables fruit and fibre is recommended.

Bowel cancer is a major health issue. Bowel cancer is a major killer in the Australian community and is the most commonly diagnosed internal cancer in Australians. It must stop being the disease that no one wants to discuss it should be the disease no one has to have.

Don't die of embarrassment; get screened now.

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