



Australian Government

Department of Health

Department of Health Submission to the Senate Community Affairs
References Committee – Investigation into a possible cancer cluster
on the Bellarine Peninsula, Victoria

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The Department of Health welcomes the opportunity to make this submission.

The Australian Government recognises the significant impact that cancer has on the Australian community and is committed to improving outcomes for those affected by this disease. The Government's efforts in cancer control are strongly based on evidence and programs span cancer prevention, early detection, including screening, and treatment.

With respect to the Committee's Terms of Reference, the Department of Health would like to make the following comments:

a. the health concerns of local residents;

The Department of Health acknowledges the concerns raised by residents about cancer cases on the Bellarine Peninsula. A cancer diagnosis in any family is a difficult health issue to manage. When a community is concerned, an investigation can assist with addressing concerns.

A cancer diagnosis can sometimes result in a high level of anxiety in the person with cancer and/or their family. There are Australian Government programs provided through general practice that are available to those diagnosed with cancer. General practitioners are in the best position to coordinate overall care and facilitate appropriate specialist referral. These services are generally supported by Medicare.

The Government also funds non-government organisations and programs to support people dealing with cancer and their families. For example, funding of \$26.5 million is being provided to CanTeen for youth cancer services over the period 2019-20 to 2023-24. Funding of \$150,000 is also being provided to the Leukaemia Foundation for the development of a National Strategic Action Plan for Blood Cancer, which aims to improve diagnosis, treatment and outcomes of blood cancers.

b. the incidence of cancer cases in the area, and any possible environmental or other contributing factors;

Since 1 January 1982, data about all new cases of cancer diagnosed in Australia¹ has been contained in the Australian Cancer Database (ACD). The Department notes the Victorian CHO's investigation has used data from the Australian Cancer Atlas (available at: <https://atlas.cancer.org.au/>), which obtains details about cancers diagnosed in Australia and their survival outcomes from the ACD.

The Victorian Department of Health and Human Services has also requested the Cancer Council Victoria to undertake additional data analysis, using cancer incidence data from the Victorian Cancer Registry and population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The finding of the analysis was published in

¹ Excluding basal and squamous cell carcinomas of the skin which are not notifiable diseases.

October 2019 and supports the findings of the Victorian Chief Health Officer's investigation.

Based on consultations with the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the Department understands there are no additional incidence data available that would be useful for the purpose of examining a cancer cluster, other than what the Victorian Government has already considered.

The Department further notes the Victorian CHO's investigation found no evidence of higher rates of cancer in any geographical areas within the Bellarine Peninsula. This included breast cancers, liver cancers, non-Hodgkin lymphoma, multiple myeloma, brain cancers and leukaemia.

The Australian Government continues its strong commitment to support health and medical research and acknowledges the critical role research plays in contributing to a world-class health system. The Government is the single largest investor in cancer research in Australia and provides funding through the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) and Cancer Australia.

From 2013 to 2019, the Government, through the NHMRC provided over \$1.2 billion for cancer research. Through the MRFF, the Government has provided over \$91 million in research funding for 61 research projects into cancer (treatments, diagnosis, care and management). This includes:

- the \$124.7 million Australian Brain Cancer Mission (which seeks to double survival rates and improve quality of life of people living with brain cancer over the next 10 years to 2027);
- the \$500 million Genomics Health Futures Mission to help save or transform the lives of Australians through genomics research;
- the \$150 million Stem Cell Therapies Mission to support the development of innovative, effective and safe treatments that are accessible to all Australians who need them; and
- the \$614 million Clinical Trials Activity measure which includes the Rare Cancers, Rare Diseases and Unmet Need Clinical Trials Initiative.

Further information on MRFF missions is available at:

<https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/medical-research-future-fund/mrff-research-themes/research-missions>.

Cancer Australia, the Government's lead national cancer control agency, has provided funding of more than \$100 million since 2013 for cancer research projects.

The Government also subsidises medicines and treatments through the Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) and Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

The Government recently announced access to the cutting edge CAR-T cell therapy, Kymriah®, which will be expanded for patients with particular types of non-hodgkin lymphoma following a positive recommendation from the Medical Services Advisory

Committee. Treatment with Kymriah gives patients who have exhausted all other treatment options a new chance at achieving remission.

A comprehensive range of medicines are subsidised through the PBS, including listings for the treatment of non-hodgkin lymphoma, multiple myeloma, leukaemia, and, liver and brain cancer.

The Department is currently investigating options and implementing the outcomes of the PBAC's consideration into options for listing programmed death-ligand 1 (PDL1) cancer immunotherapies for the treatment of multiple tumours (pan-tumour indications) on the PBS.

c. the evidence, approach and outcomes concerning the Victorian Chief Health Officer's investigation of cancer rates on the Bellarine Peninsula.

The Department of Health has considered the Victorian Chief Health Officer's investigation of cancer rates on the Bellarine Peninsula, including data sources used (Australian Cancer Atlas) and the methodology adopted in the investigation. Based on this consideration, the Department is of the view the investigation was methodologically robust and comprehensive.