



Mount Barker Courier
Wednesday 21/9/2011
Page: 48
Section: General News
Region: Mount Barker SA Circulation: 12,914
Type: Regional
Size: 623.37 sq.cms.
Frequency: --W----

Brief: CAN_SA
Page 1 of 2



Wistow researcher Dr Anna Shillabeer has developed ways to help health professionals better communicate with young cancer patients in the hope it will improve their chances of recovery.

By Lisa Pahl

Keeping teenagers with cancer informed about their illness and treatment options could be the difference between life and death, according to a Hills researcher.

While cancer survival rates have improved over the past two decades for all other age groups, there has been no change to the chances of adolescents beating the disease.

Wistow academic Dr Anna Shillabeer hopes to alter that with her findings that target new ways to deliver information to teenage sufferers.

The researcher is an expert on medical informatics, or medical data analysis.

Her latest work, unveiled to health professionals at an international conference in Norway last month, focuses on better informing young people with cancer to improve their treatment experience.

"It was really to be saying to these professionals that produce this information and medical practitioners who work with teenagers that you need to work with this group differently," she said.

"... For those aged 12-18, their chances of surviving have not improved over the last 20 years, whereas for children and older people, the survival rates have gone up by about 50%.

"They are generally lumped in with children or adults ... (but) they do have different needs."



For those aged 12-18, their chances of surviving have not improved over the last 20 years, whereas for children and older people, the survival rates have gone up by about 50%

Dr Shillabeer was inspired to find ways to improve the treatment process for young people after seeing them struggle in a city hospital ward.

"Whenever I saw them there, they would be quiet and withdrawn," she said.

"You could tell they hated everything and there was nothing they could do about it.

"... They have a generally miserable time and the impact that has on their ability to recover is significant."

Social media

But giving them "relevant, timely information" could have a "significant benefit in terms of recovery and a feeling of wellbeing", she said.

And using new technologies such as social media and mobile phones to deliver that information would also help, she said.

"We are not putting the information in a place where these young people go to get the information," Dr Shillabeer said.

Adolescence was a "vulnerable age" with puberty, a need to be accepted by their peer group and a focus on body image and adding a cancer diagnosis compounded those issues, she said.

"At a time when they most need to

be accepted, to be feeling some kind of 'normal', they can't and they have no control over that," she said.

Dr Shillabeer is turning her research into a book for those who surround and support young people with cancer.

She said Australia was better than many countries in supporting teens with cancer because it has the adolescent service, CanTeen.

The organisation's national programs and services manager, Dr Claire Treadgold, said providing teenage cancer patients with information they could relate to and understand made an "enormous difference" to their treatment.

"Having information they understand gives them back a sense of empowerment and control," she said.

"It's really important for them to be given the opportunity to be involved in decision making."

Those who are well informed and involved are more likely to stick with their treatment programs, boosting their chances of survival, Dr Treadgold said.

Through its website, nowwhat.org.au, CanTeen delivers information directly to affected teens.

It also trains doctors in the needs of young people with cancer.