



MEDIA RELEASE

BRAIN TUMOUR SUPPORT NZ

Nelson, New Zealand

[Wednesday 3 February 2021, 9.00am NZDT]

REPORT REVEALS STARK INEQUITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH BRAIN CANCER IN NEW ZEALAND

Data included in a comprehensive report released yesterday by the Cancer Control Agency reveals the dire situation faced by New Zealanders diagnosed with brain cancer. The inaugural *State of Cancer in New Zealand 2020*¹ report provides a snapshot on the current state of cancer care in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

“The report places a major focus on the inequities faced by some communities in New Zealand, such as Maori and Pacifica peoples, and rightly so,” according to Brain Tumour Support NZ chair, Mandy Bathan.

“However the report also shows how brain cancer is lagging behind other cancers when it comes to key statistics such as survival and research funding,” says Mandy.

An analysis of cancer survival, as measured by the percentage of people surviving five years or more following their diagnosis, shows significant improvements in survival rates from 1998/99 to 2016/17 for cancers such as non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma (48% to 65%) and breast cancer (79% to 89%). However the survival rate for brain cancer has barely shifted over that period, from 21% in 1998/99 to 22% in 2016/17².

“The survival situation for brain cancer is actually even worse than is stated in the report,” according to Mandy. “The 22% survival rate reported encompasses all forms of brain cancer, however glioblastoma multiforme, the most common form of adult brain cancer, has a 5-year survival rate of just 6%,” she said.

While brain cancer is the 16th most common cancer by incidence, the report ranks it as the 8th most deadly cancer, highlighting its poor survival.³ Regrettably, brain cancer is a major factor in childhood cancers, ranking alongside leukaemia as the most common cancer type diagnosed in children aged 14 years or under in 2019.⁴

Despite the grim statistics, the report shows that research funding allocated to brain cancer is significantly lower than most other cancers in New Zealand. An analysis of Health Research Council funding by cancer type from 2006-2019 contained in the report ranks brain cancer second to bottom of a list of thirteen cancers, despite having the 4th highest mortality rate.⁵

¹ *State of Cancer in New Zealand 2020*, Te Aho O Te Kahu, Cancer Control Agency, published 2 February 2021: <https://teaho.govt.nz/reports/cancer-state>

² *State of Cancer in New Zealand 2020*, Te Aho O Te Kahu, Cancer Control Agency, Fig. 1.17, page 19

³ *State of Cancer in New Zealand 2020*, Te Aho O Te Kahu, Cancer Control Agency, Fig. 1.18, page 20

⁴ *State of Cancer in New Zealand 2020*, Te Aho O Te Kahu, Cancer Control Agency, Fig. 1.15, page 17

⁵ *State of Cancer in New Zealand 2020*, Te Aho O Te Kahu, Cancer Control Agency, Fig. 9.1, page 117

“Research funding is the critical first step in developing new treatments and producing better outcomes for brain cancer patients,” according to Chris Tse, senior advisor to the International Brain Tumour Alliance (UK) and a trustee of Brain Tumour Support NZ. Chris says New Zealand’s situation is in stark contrast to Australia, where the federal government, together with philanthropic sources, have pledged A\$133 million for brain cancer research over the next 10 years.⁶

Cancer prevention and screening also feature prominently in the Cancer Control Agency report, yet neither of these impact brain cancer, as there are no known prevention measures and screening is impractical. “Brain tumours are diagnosed by a brain MRI (magnetic resonance imaging). MRIs are expensive and it is not possible to scan the entire population,” Chris said.

The report states that improvements in cancer survival rates have been slower in Aotearoa compared with other countries, and that New Zealand now ranks lower than in the past relative to other high-income countries group in terms of survival rates.⁷

This comes as no surprise to Mandy and Chris. They say that there are brain tumour treatments funded in Australia, and elsewhere in the developed world, which are not funded by PHARMAC. One such treatment, the drug bevacizumab (Avastin) gained FDA approval in the USA back in 2009 but has since been declined by PHARMAC.

“New Zealand brain tumour patients who need bevacizumab are required to self-fund their treatment to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars per year. This creates a situation of “haves” and “have nots” and is a major contributing factor in cancer inequities in this country,” according to Chris.

“While we appreciate that the Cancer Control Agency must address all cancer types, we are concerned that brain tumour patients in Aotearoa continue to fall between the cracks of our healthcare system,” Mandy said. She would like to see immediate strategies developed to improve the outcomes for brain cancer patients and their families.

“In all aspects of cancer care, from diagnosis to treatment and support, we can and we must do better.”

Ends

ABOUT BRAIN TUMOURS

- Brain tumours are the biggest cancer killer of children and adults under 40.
- Every year around 335 New Zealanders are diagnosed with primary brain cancer, representing 1.4% of all cancers diagnosed in New Zealand.
- Around 250 New Zealanders die each year from brain cancer.

ABOUT BRAIN TUMOUR SUPPORT NZ

Brain Tumour Support NZ is a registered charity formed in 2019 to provide much needed support, information and advocacy to brain tumour patients in New Zealand. Our Vision is that everyone living with a brain tumour

⁶ Cancer Australia: <https://www.canceraustralia.gov.au/research-data/research/australian-brain-cancer-mission>

⁷ *State of Cancer in New Zealand 2020*, Te Aho O Te Kahu, Cancer Control Agency, page 19

has the support, information and access to best treatments, so they feel less afraid, less alone and more empowered.

Website: www.braintumoursupport.org.nz

Media Contacts at Brain Tumour Support NZ:

Mandy Bathan – Chair (021-0731294, mandy@braintumoursupport.org.nz)

Chris Tse – Trustee (027-2712004, chris@braintumoursupport.org.nz)