

# **What helps a person get through a cancer diagnosis - findings from a cross sectional survey of NZ adults: A technical report**

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A recent NZ study involved in depth interviews with cancer survivors about things that helped them “get through” their diagnosis of cancer.<sup>1,2</sup> While a broad range of topics was discussed, themes included: the importance of accepting change; a positive attitude; support from family/whanau, friends and health care professionals; the role of employment and individualised support; and the support needs of Tangata whenua.

The current study complements that work by asking a simpler, but similar, question of a national, cross-sectional sample of NZ adults. This provides information about what the wider NZ community (which includes those who have and have not personally experienced a cancer diagnosis) understands as being helpful to someone receiving a diagnosis.

## Methods

The Cancer Awareness in Aotearoa New Zealand (CAANZ15) study cohort consists of 1064 individuals (588 females and 476 males, 64% response rate), randomly selected from the electoral rolls, and telephone numbers traced from this information.<sup>3-5</sup> Data were collected in late 2014 and early 2015 via telephone administered interviews, taking an average of 20 minutes.

Participants were asked about their general experience of cancer; *‘Have you, or anyone close to you such as a close friend or family member ever been diagnosed as having cancer?’* and their thoughts about what might help someone in this situation *‘What do you think might help get a person through a diagnosis of cancer?’* The latter open-ended question was coded into categories of responses. Categories with greater than 1% of total responses are reported here. Categorisation was checked by a second member of the research team and discrepancies resolved. Demographic data, including age, sex and socioeconomic status were also collected. To calculate proportions of

responses, the survey data were weighted to adjust for differences between the sample population and the general adult population as measured by the 2013 NZ Census.

## Results

Overall, 89.3% of all respondents (87.8% male, 90.4% female) reported that either they, or a close friend or family member had experienced a cancer diagnosis.

*Table 1: Perceptions of what might help get a person through a diagnosis of cancer from participants in the CAANZ study conducted in 2014/15, ranked by percentage of total responses*

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Total (%)
Whanau, family and friends	37.6	48.2	43.6
Community support	25.8	25.8	25.8
Information, education and being informed	11.7	25.5	19.4
Consistent, correct, good treatment	21.4	17.1	19.0
Good support or relationship with medical staff	7.4	12.1	10.0
Positive thinking	12.1	6.5	8.9
Early detection and timely treatment	6.7	4.6	5.5
Support groups, talking to other survivors	2.3	6.5	4.6
Listening, talking, understanding	3.5	4.7	4.2
Emotional support	3.9	3.9	3.9
Financial help, money, insurance	2.1	3.5	2.9
Practical support	0.8	3.6	2.4
Faith, religion	2.1	2.7	2.4
Hope	2.2	2.3	2.3
Depends on individual and cancer type	1.9	2.5	2.2
Healthy lifestyle	2.4	2.1	2.2
Counselling	1.0	3.2	2.2
Access to complementary or alternative treatments	1.2	1.9	1.6
Knowing what the prognosis and pathway is	1.2	1.3	1.3
Honesty and full disclosure	1.4	1.2	1.3
Palliative care/hospice	0.9	1.5	1.2
Clear communication	1.0	1.0	1.0
Live life	1.0	1.0	1.0
Support for family	1.5	0.5	1.0
Culturally appropriate support	0.0	1.0	0.0
Do not know	6.9	3.7	5.1

Notes: multiple responses were allowed therefore categories may add to more than 100%; only those with proportions  $\geq 1\%$  are reported here.

## Discussion

A key finding here is that, while respondents were not asked directly if they personally had experienced a cancer diagnosis, a high proportion (89%) reported affirmatively for either themselves or someone close to them. This is important in the context of the Cancer Society's mission to reduce both the incidence and impact of cancer,<sup>6</sup> in that most New Zealanders potentially stand to benefit, given the breadth of impact observed here.

As with previous research in this area,<sup>1,2</sup> the importance of whanau, family and friends in helping people cope with a diagnosis of cancer was emphasised by respondents in this study, alongside support from the broader community. The importance of positivity was another commonality between the two studies.

Effective cancer services were another theme in this study, including access to good information about cancer, early detection, timely treatment and good relationships with medical staff. Some respondents also mentioned cancer support groups with other survivors as being important.

Interestingly, relatively few individuals in this study mentioned the importance of employment, which was a major theme of earlier work.<sup>1,2</sup> This finding may be because of contextual factors or cues during the earlier survey, but the results of both surveys suggest that the wider community, which includes employers and workmates, could benefit from understanding how they can support cancer survivors in these roles. The Cancer Society has produced some resources that could contribute to this.<sup>7,8</sup>

It is hoped this report will provide some useful context for the Cancer Society's supportive care agenda and a discussion point for how the wider New Zealand community can provide meaningful support for those who receive a cancer diagnosis.

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