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**Supervillain**  
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**'It's not a death sentence'**  
 We're beating the big C more often

Bronwyn Torrie

CANCER need no longer be a considered a death sentence, with mortality rates falling by about a third since 1991, new research shows.

The overall cancer death rate fell by 32 per cent in the 13 years till 2004, researchers from Otago University's department of public health in Wellington found.

"This is a success story, and a tribute to our improving health services," lead co-author Professor Tony Blakely said yesterday.

Earlier diagnosis, improved surgical treatments, more effective drugs, and generally better care were all factors in the improvement, the study says.

"The good news is that, averaged across all cancers, people diagnosed with cancer in 2004 had a 32 per cent lower death rate from their cancer than people diagnosed in 1991," Prof Blakely said.

The death rate for leukaemia dropped by 70 per cent, breast cancer by 61 per cent and thyroid cancer by 55 per cent.

However, other cancers such as lung and pancreatic have showed little improvement over time.

Cancer Society national screening and early detection adviser Sarah Penno said the CancerTrends study instilled hope for the estimated 20,000 New Zealanders diagnosed with cancer every year.

"Cancer still holds that fear and terror - just the word - and I think it's really good to say actually we are making quite a difference and most people will survive. It's not a death sentence, which a lot of people still think."

Data in the study was available only till 2004 because of difficulties in matching census data with the national cancer registry. Patients have to be clear of symptoms for up to five years before they can be considered to be cancer-free.

Researchers investigated survival rates for 21 different cancers in people diagnosed from 1991 till 2004, and followed up for possible deaths until the end of 2006. Linking the study with census data allowed accurate

analysis for the first time of trends by ethnicity and household income.

Prof Blakely said it remained a concern that Maori and people on low incomes were less likely to survive than others, though their mortality rates had also fallen.

Maori had a 29 per cent higher death rate than non-Maori, as they were "more likely to fall between the cracks in navigating their way through the health system", he said.

Maori were also more likely to have other health issues, such as diabetes and heart disease, which affected their ability to beat cancer.

"So we actually have to address all the other health statistics to improve the cancer outcomes, which is a big ask, of course."

He was alarmed at the widening gap between the rich and poor in cancer death rates.

In 1991, people on low incomes had a 6 per cent greater death rate than those on high incomes. This tripled to 18 per cent in 2004.

He suspected those with higher incomes were able to afford new treatments before they were government-funded.

"If there's a new treatment for breast cancer - let's take [breast cancer drug] Herceptin as an example - and you can pay for it before Pharmac funds it, you can get ahead on those treatments and get ahead of the average population in your survival chances."

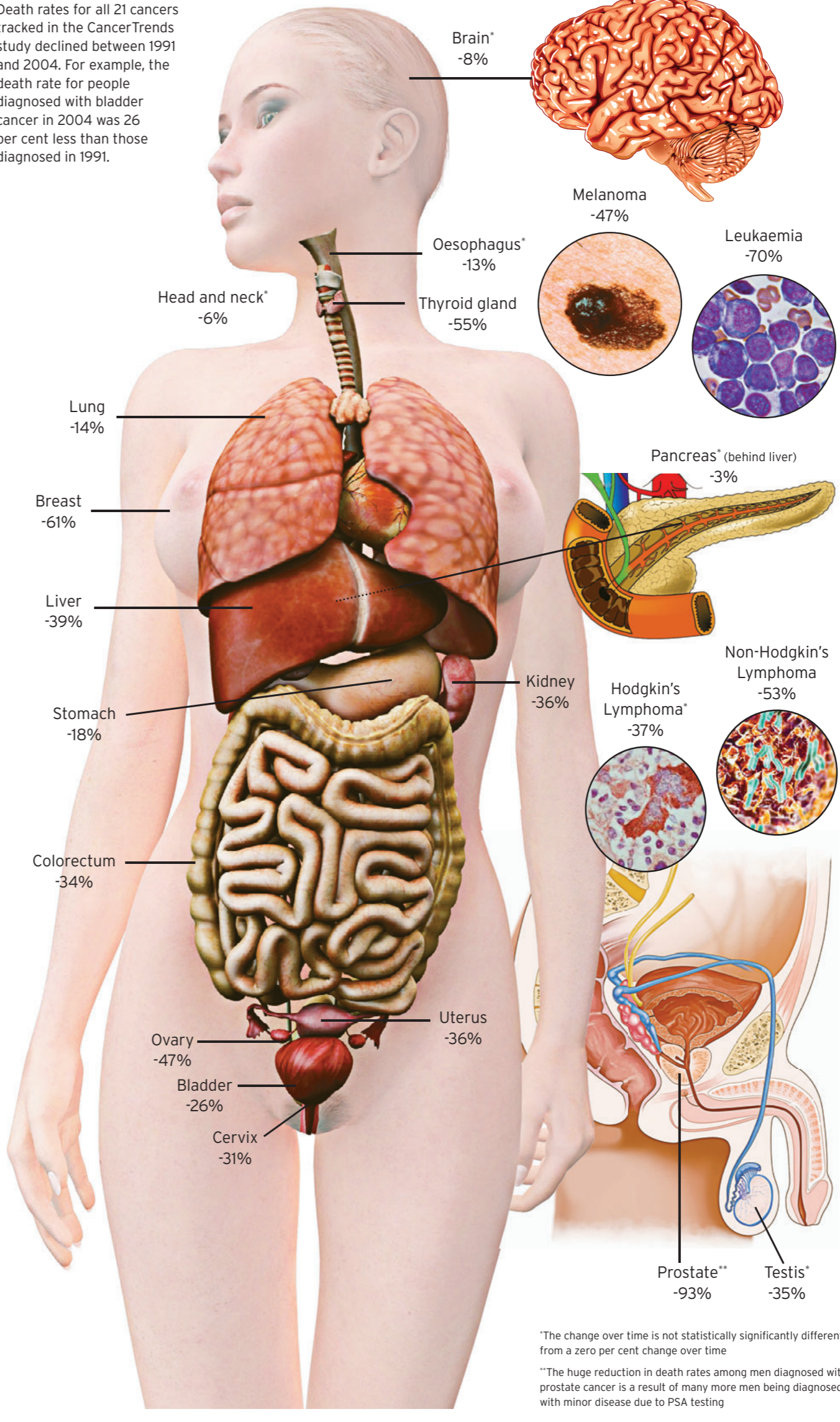
Associate Health Minister Tariana Turia said that, although she welcomed the large improvements in cancer survival, she was concerned there had been no reduction in the inequality gap between Maori and non-Maori patients.

"Cancer has always been an illness of high incidence among Maori, and the research has highlighted the need to do more in order to produce better health outcomes for this group."

"It's also about injustice. Inequalities occur when Maori don't get screened or referred to treatment early enough."

Fighting smoking was a key strategy in reducing lung cancer, she said, and she intended to look at ways of making New Zealand smokefree by 2025.

Death rates for all 21 cancers tracked in the CancerTrends study declined between 1991 and 2004. For example, the death rate for people diagnosed with bladder cancer in 2004 was 26 per cent less than those diagnosed in 1991.



**Hammered:** Kane Le'aupepe, 19, believes he was hit by a former player.

**Bone in neck broken after game revenge**

Blair Emsor  
 POLICE

WHAT began as a minor squabble on a rugby field last season escalated into an alcohol-fuelled street brawl between rival players in Courtenay Place that left one man with a broken bone in his neck.

Punches rained down on a group of four Johnsonville colts players as they were attacked by a group of up to nine men about 1.30am on Sunday.

Talented centre Kane Le'aupepe, 19, had a bone in his neck broken after he was "king-hit". Doctors have told him he cannot play rugby for the rest of the season. Two of his team-mates were also injured.

Mr Le'aupepe said he believed the man who started the fight was a former member of the Upper Hutt colts.

The musical theatre student at Whitireia said he was walking to a bar when he was shoulder-barged by a man he recognised from "a bit of push and shove" during a rugby match last season.

"I turned around and said, 'What's the problem?' and he just says to me, 'I remember you from the field. Let's go.' I turned to my mate and said, 'Nah'... and that's when I got hit. I didn't even see the punch coming."

He fell to the ground and was dragged to his feet by a mate. "Then he [the mate] started getting hammered and that's when I started getting punched by all of them. I just felt a whole pile of fists on me. I just blacked out."

Police have yet to formally interview Mr Le'aupepe but said they were confident an arrest would be made later this week or early next week.

Johnsonville Rugby Club colts manager Terry Callesen said the alleged attackers should be banned from playing rugby.

"Normally in my day you have a fight on the field, you shake hands afterwards and you have a beer."

Upper Hutt Rugby Football Club chairman Brett Pearson said it was not clear whether the incident involved past players of the club. "If... players were involved in violence in the community, then they wouldn't really have a future at our club."

**Positivity a key factor in recovery, says Laban**

Jody O'Callaghan

THERE is no need to fear a cancer diagnosis, says former MP Winnie Laban, who found out four years ago that she had breast cancer.

"We can live, we can survive and we can fight," she said. "I'm a great believer in banning negativity. It is important to have a positive frame of mind, not to feel like everything is falling to pieces."

There were times when she felt down during her treatment, but those times were exceeded by the positive thoughts and the smiles.

While plenty of people died from cancer, there were also thousands who did not.

Ms Laban, now assistant vice-chancellor for Pasifika at Victoria University, is looking forward to four years of being cancer-free in August, after chemotherapy, radiation treatment and two mastectomies.

"I think what's important is that people need to be vigilant about their health," she



**'What's important is that people need to be vigilant about their health.'**

WINNIE LABAN

said. But they should not become paralysed by fear. "It's really, really important that doctors and oncologists absolutely take the time to talk through the nature of the cancer being diagnosed. The treatment options, side-effects, and to be really positive."

The falling mortality rates were a sign of the good treatment options available, she said.

"Not everybody has a lot of money to be able to afford all of the options. It's a pity that some of the treatment is so expensive."

**WEATHER A10 PUZZLES C4**

**TODAY**  
 EAST COASTERS NEED SHOWER CAPS, MAINLY FINE ELSEWHERE

**WELLINGTON CITY**  
 HUTT VALLEY  
 PORIRUA  
 KAPITI COAST

HIGH 15  
 LOW 10  
 HIGH 16  
 LOW 11  
 HIGH 15  
 LOW 9  
 HIGH 17  
 LOW 9

**TOMORROW**  
 FINE. MOW THE LAWN KIDS, IT'S A GREAT WAY TO END THE HOLIDAYS

**AUCKLAND**  
 FINE  
**TAURANGA**  
 FINE

**TAUPO**  
 FINE  
**WHANGANUI**  
 FINE

**GISBORNE**  
 SHOWERY  
**NAPIER/HASTINGS**  
 ODD SHOWERS

**PALMERSTON NTH**  
 MOSTLY FINE  
**MASTERTON**  
 LIGHT SHOWERS

**NEW PLYMOUTH**  
 MAINLY FINE  
**NELSON**  
 FINE

**BLenheim**  
 FINE  
**CHRISTCHURCH**  
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