Stigma around lung cancer causes delays in diagnosis: new report

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The stigma associated with lung cancer due to its links with smoking and poor prognoses may result in delays in diagnosis, a new report1 has concluded.

The report explores personal experiences and perceptions around lung cancer through a series of interviews with NSW GPs and people with the disease.

“Most of the people with lung cancer reported feeling stigmatised, with some also experiencing blame from health professionals and the general community,” Cancer Institute CEO, Chief Cancer Officer and report author Professor David Currow said.

“GPs confirmed that there was a sense of blame associated with a diagnosis of lung cancer because it was typically seen as having been caused by someone’s choice to smoke for many years.”

Views of lung cancer as a ‘death sentence’ and a severe health consequence of smoking was another reason why participants were hesitant to seek medical advice for lung cancer symptoms.

Professor Currow said that if lung cancer is diagnosed when it is not advanced and is suitable for surgery, surgery can improve the chance of living to 5 years after diagnosis to around 66 per cent2.

“The idea that lung cancer is a death sentence is something we need to combat as it contributes to a fear to investigate symptoms which results in later diagnosis that in turn reduces survival rates,” Professor Currow said.

“While acknowledging lung cancer’s links to smoking, it is important to focus on symptoms themselves as a way of prompting earlier detection of lung cancer.

“GPs can play a major part in addressing this by balancing their own anti-smoking messages with encouraging patients to seek help if they experience smoking-related symptoms.”

Now in its third year, the campaign encourages people to listen out for symptoms of lung cancer – persistent cough, change in cough and coughing up blood; across their family, friends, community and colleagues.

“Listen out for lung cancer also encourages people with suspect symptoms to request a chest x-ray to improve early detection rates and in turn survival from the disease,” Professor Currow said.

2 Based on 5-year absolute survival of people in NSW diagnosed with localised non-small cell lung cancer 2003–2007, who received surgery within 6 months of diagnosis. Data source: Linked NSW Central Cancer Registry and NSW Admitted Patient Data Collection.
An additional challenge identified through the study was that delays were suggested to occur when GPs didn’t consider that a non-smoker may be at risk of lung cancer and as a result pursued treatment for other conditions.

"While tobacco smoking is the largest single cause of lung cancer, 10 per cent of cancers in men and 35 per cent in women are not attributed to this cause,“ Professor Currow said.

"While maintaining the important messages around the relationship between smoking and lung cancer, it’s important we also work to break down stigma around having the disease and encourage early detection and treatment if we are to improve lung cancer survival rates."

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3 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Lung Cancer in Australia, 2011