



Innovating for Life | Cancer



“It’s not in me to give up!”

Elaine: Breast Cancer Survivor.

ELAINE’S STORY: In Australia today, breast cancer is never far from public awareness. And with good reason: it is the cancer responsible for the most female deaths. But it is also increasingly one that many women survive. The key to successfully fighting breast cancer is early diagnosis and treatment. Here is one survivor’s story.

Sport has always been a part of Elaine’s life. She loves to watch and participate in it. A tennis player for most of her life, she has attended thirty consecutive Australian Open Tournaments. At 53, she had returned to playing sport, competing with players decades younger than herself. At this stage of her life, Elaine couldn’t believe her luck.

That’s when her luck ran out

Elaine returned home one night from a successful tennis championship match to find a letter saying her mammogram results warranted further investigation. The diagnosis of breast cancer that followed hit Elaine like a sledgehammer.

As she says, *“One minute I’m happy, healthy, fit and financially secure, and the next I’m looking at a potentially life-threatening illness.”*

This is where Elaine’s love of sport came in. *“Once I realised what the challenge was I decided I wasn’t going to lose to this disease. I wanted above all else to win – and that meant hearing the bad news first.”*

Elaine saw her surgeon and at the very first meeting told him to not sugarcoat anything but to tell her the worst that she could be facing. Elaine wanted to take the *“Expect the worst and hope for the best approach”*.

The result was dramatic. *“He was straight with me,”* Elaine says, *“and at the same time he made sure I knew I wouldn’t be alone in this challenge.”*

So Elaine’s fight for life started. *“We decided on surgery to remove the lump, radiotherapy as a precaution and oral chemotherapy. I had guidance from people I trusted and who were highly qualified to know what was best for me.”*

Elaine had made up her mind how she was going to fight her cancer. As she says, *“It is a proven therapy for the type of cancer I had so I felt confident we had a good chance of beating it and we did.”*

“Four weeks after my surgery I went back to tennis. My life is busier than ever and I grab any opportunity that looks like fun. I have been able to volunteer as a counsellor for people living with cancer and help to organise fund-raising campaigns for breast cancer research.”

Elaine says, *“I still play tennis every week. Twelve months ago I took up dragon boat paddling with a local club – all breast cancer survivors – and we’re out on the water twice a week. Luckily, my team mates are always patient because it has taken me forever to get the timing right – and it’s not in me to give up.”*

What is cancer?

Cancer is a group of diseases in which normal cells develop abnormally and spread (metastasise) to other parts of the body. These are called tumours. Cancer is a common disease but thankfully, with new treatments coming all the time, we have more tools in the fight against it. But there is still a long way to go.

Malignant and benign tumours

Tumours can be benign or malignant (a cancer). Benign tumours do not invade other tissues or spread to other parts of the body, although they can expand to interfere with the healthy body.

In Australia today, everyone’s life will be touched by cancer, sooner or later. As we all live longer, we stand a greater chance of getting cancer or knowing someone who is living with it. Anyone can develop cancer. Cancer has a major impact on the Australian community. At current incidence rates, one in three men and one in four women in Australia will develop a form of cancer by the age of 75. By age 85, the risk increases to one in two for men and one in three for women.

Breast cancer

Breast cancer is the most common invasive cancer in women and responsible for the highest death rate.

There are almost 12,000 new cases of breast cancer each year in Australia. Cancer drugs such as various forms of chemotherapy have contributed to improved survival rates in recent years for many forms of cancer.

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Targeted medicines to treat various cancers over the last decade

Medicine	Cancer
rituximab	non-Hodgkins lymphoma
trastuzumab	metastatic breast cancer
imatinib mesylate	chronic myeloid leukaemia
imatinib mesylate	gastrointestinal tumours
cetuximab	colorectal cancer
bevacizumab	colorectal cancer
erlotinib	lung cancer
erlotinib	pancreatic cancer
sorafenib	kidney cancer
panitumumab	colorectal cancer
trastuzumab	early breast cancer
sunitinib	kidney cancer & gastrointestinal cancer
lapatinib	advanced breast cancer

Which other cancers are common in Australia?

In 2004, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the most common cancers in Australian men were those of the prostate, bowel, lung, and skin. These four cancers account for 62% of all cancers in men.

In Australian women, the incidence of breast cancer is followed by bowel cancer, melanoma and lung cancer, which in total account for 59% of all cancers in women.

More Australians are surviving cancer

More than half of all cancers diagnosed in Australia are successfully treated, and survival rates for some common cancers have increased by more than 20% in the past two decades.

In general, Australian survival rates for cancer are high by world standards. Five-year survival rates for the most common cancers affecting men (prostate) and women (breast) are now close to 80%.

These statistics probably don't tell the full story. Generally if people who have been living with cancer pass the 5-year milestone in remission, they are considered cured and their doctor gives them the good news that they don't have to come back for any more treatment.

These gains have largely been attributed by The Cancer Council Australia to better diagnostic tools, earlier detection and improvements in treatment.

Thanks to early diagnosis, advances in surgery and new pharmaceutical therapies, more Australians are surviving cancer.

Particular progress has been made in the areas of testicular cancer and childhood leukemia.

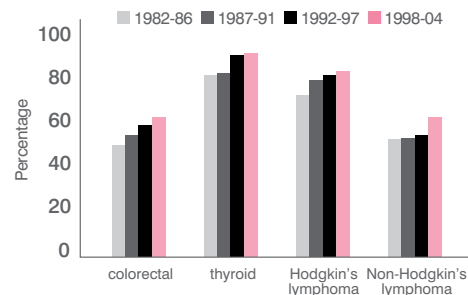
Cancers with the highest relative survival rates for men were testicular cancer (95%), thyroid cancer (95%), and melanoma (90%). In women the highest survival rates were for thyroid cancer (95%), melanoma (95%) and Hodgkin's lymphoma (84%).

In the last few decades, the five-year survival period of patients with leukemia has tripled. While in the 1960's the five-year survival rate was around 15%, nowadays it revolves around 50%. The five-year survival rate for children diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia is around 80%.

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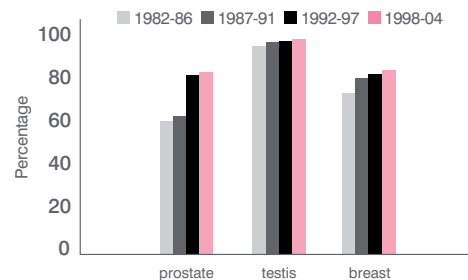
Cancer survival rates in Australia

Improvement in 5-year survival rates for specific cancers.



Source: Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, Australia's Health 2008

Improvement in 5-year survival rates for gender specific cancers.



Source: Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, Australia's Health 2008

In the publication, *Australia's Health 2008*, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare noted the continued improvement in survival rates in Australians diagnosed with cancer. In large measure, this is due to improved cancer treatments. Around the world, pharmaceutical companies are continuing to invest many millions of dollars in bringing these new treatments to Australians living with cancer.

New cancer treatments to come

Although it can cost up to a billion dollars to develop a new medicine, researchers are racing to develop new treatments for cancer. Pharmaceutical discovery is entering a new era with a greater understanding of our genetic make-up and our rapidly increasing knowledge of how disease works at a molecular level. The next generation of cancer medicines are proving to have fewer side effects and a greater ability to target tumours. In future, more and more Australians can be expected to survive cancer, and we can hopefully expect to see more forms of cancer cured in our lifetimes.

*This excerpt is from the book *Innovating for Life*. For a copy, visit www.medicinesaustralia.com.au*

References:

1. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australasian Association of Cancer Registries. *Cancer in Australia 2006*. Canberra: AIHW, 2007.
2. <http://www.cancer.org.au/aboutcancer/cancertypes/breastcancer.htm>
3. www.canceraustralia.gov.au/about-cancer/cancer-information/cancer-in-australia.aspx
4. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 22 November 2004.
5. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australia's Health 2008*.

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Australians generally enjoy good health. We rank among the top five countries in the world for life expectancy at birth. Our life expectancy is rising more rapidly than in comparable countries such as the United States and United Kingdom.

Ready access to new medicines in Australia has played a significant part in achieving good health outcomes. But it is a sobering reality that for every 10,000 new chemical compounds created in the laboratory, only five will ever survive to be clinically evaluated. On average, only one of these compounds will then reach the point where it will be approved as a medicine.

Fortunately, new therapies that target specific cancers have helped to improve survival rates for Australians. These pharmaceutical therapies, along with early diagnosis and advances in surgery, have meant that the survival rates for some common cancers have increased from between 15% and 20% in the past two decades. And with a greater understanding of our genetic make-up and our rapidly increasing knowledge of how disease works at a molecular level, more and more Australians can be expected to survive cancer in the future.

Medicines Australia represents the innovative pharmaceutical companies of Australia and we are committed to developing new medicines and vaccines that help Australians to live longer and lead a better quality of life.

That's the real value of medicines.



Will Delaat, Chairman

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