



Introduction

A growing number of Australians are being diagnosed with breast cancer each year, with an estimated 20,741 people projected to be diagnosed in 2022¹. Breast cancer retains the highest incidence rates for cancer among women, with around one in seven Australian women affected in their lifetime. For every diagnosis, there are multiple people who are also profoundly affected, including family, friends, and the health professionals delivering cancer care.

Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) knows that the challenges of this disease are constantly evolving. We are now better understanding the unique needs of younger women with breast cancer, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, LGBTIQ+ communities, men with breast cancer, and those who live in rural and regional areas. Those living with incurable metastatic breast cancer are also living longer, thanks to advances in treatments and medical technology, while still representing unique health challenges for a growing group of patients.

We also know that Australia's ongoing response to COVID-19 is both causing and exaggerating unacceptable gaps in access to optimal cancer care, and our health systems are experiencing unprecedented strain.

Responding to all these challenges must remain a national priority. We are seeking a commitment from all parties and independents contesting the 2022 federal election to ensure every Australian with breast cancer receives the best possible care no matter who they are, or where they live.

While breast cancer does not discriminate, it does disproportionately affect women. As such, BCNA also supports wider work to address gendered policy issues such as the gender wage gap, health inequities, and lack of financial support for parents.

BCNA's role and voice

BCNA is Australia's largest breast cancer consumer organisation and is internationally recognised as a leading health consumer group. BCNA represents over 160,000 members in its network and is frequently the sought-after voice at the forefront of breast cancer issues across policy, research, and service development.

BCNA has highlighted six key areas, including 17 specific recommendations, that require further commitment from the federal government to improve outcomes for those with breast cancer from 2022 onwards. These recommendations are informed by our network as well as the most recent findings in cancer and healthcare research across Australia and worldwide.

These recommendations focus primarily on system investment and policy change to improve equity and care for all Australians affected by breast cancer.



1. (Cancer Australia, 2022)



► Recommendation one: Improve mental health support for those with cancer

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare has reported data indicating the demand for mental health support has increased by around 20 per cent compared with pre-COVID periods². Many within our network are struggling with the strain of the pandemic combined with the existing psychological impacts of a breast cancer diagnosis, creating increased burden on limited specialist psycho-oncological mental health resources. When addressing this burden, specific attention needs to be given to the unique psycho-social needs of those with a cancer diagnosis.

We call for:

1. Specific emphasis on the needs of those with cancer in the Sixth National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Plan, with regard to pillars one (prevention and early intervention), four (supporting the vulnerable), and five (governance and workforce).
2. Greater investment in non-governmental services providing specialised mental health support to those with cancer to fill workforce and capacity gaps in the public mental health system.
3. Investment to grow the psycho-oncology workforce and to upskill the existing mental health workforce with cancer-specific training.

► Recommendation two: Reduce the financial burden of breast cancer

The cost of breast cancer continues to be a significant burden for Australian women and men. We know that disparities in access to care are often based on socio-economic background. BCNA advocates for policies to not only increase and expand subsidies for important breast cancer tests, treatments and interventions, but also for policy initiatives that facilitate greater access to financial support for those with breast cancer and their families.

We call for:

4. Subsidisation of genetic and genomic profile testing on the Medicare Benefits Scheme to alleviate the cost of this service.
5. Consolidation of processes and greater international harmonisation when considering new drugs, and the re-purposing of existing drugs, for subsidy on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.
6. Regulatory changes to allow for easier early compassionate access to superannuation for breast cancer patients to fund treatment and care.
7. Appointment of Chronic Illness Liaison Officers within Centrelink to provide greater specialist financial support to those with cancer and other long-term illnesses.

► Recommendation three: Invest in COVID-19 health system recovery and future sustainability

The health environment has changed rapidly and drastically across Australia to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that cancer care has been impacted by workforce shortages, staff burnout, re-allocation of health resources, suspension of elective surgery and the effects of high COVID-19 hospitalisations. BCNA wants to ensure that Australia's public health system remains sustainable and capable of delivering the best possible care to those with breast cancer by investing in the future of the specialist cancer workforce and mitigating the effects of the significant elective surgery backlog.

2. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021)

We call for:

- Investment to recruit and retain the specialist cancer nursing workforce (including Breast Care Nurses, Metastatic Breast Care Nurses and Cancer Nurse Practitioners), to ensure optimal care is not impeded by a substituted, non-specialist nursing workforce amid current shortages.
- Development of a national plan to clear elective surgery backlogs through better partnerships between public and private healthcare, and increased transparency of elective surgery waiting lists for consumers.

► Recommendation four: Lead reform in breast cancer early detection

Early detection remains one of the most important ways to improve breast cancer outcomes. However, the current model for population-based breast screening creates disparities for consumers across Australia due to the absence of clear guidelines to respond to the latest research and evidence. Many groups are also still underrepresented in screening, such as First Nations people by almost 30 per cent³ compared with non-Indigenous BCNA advocates for the Australian Government to establish clearer consumer-centred leadership to guide BreastScreen programs based on the most recent evidence towards risk-stratified breast screening, breast density, and new screening technologies.

We call for:

- A clear strategy to implement the recommendations of the Roadmap for Optimising Screening in Australia (ROSA) project, commit to increase national participation rates, and guide best practice based on consumer experience and latest evidence. This may be implemented through existing BreastScreen governance structures and/or embedded into the new Australian Cancer Plan.
- Reporting of participation rates and outcome data by all states/territories for BreastScreen and other public and private diagnostic services.
- Increased funding to support Indigenous-led breast screening initiatives targeting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders to help reduce disproportionate breast cancer mortality experienced by these groups via increased early detection.

► Recommendation five: Collect and report optimal care data

Disconnected and absent reporting of the provision of optimal care for those with breast cancer impedes BCNA's ability to advocate where gaps exist and inhibits evidence-based health policy reform for all Australians. We call for national reporting to better understand the experiences of those with breast cancer across all principles of optimal care, including multidisciplinary care, supportive care, and end-of-life care. BCNA advocates for this reporting to be embedded in and funded via the Australian Cancer Plan.

We call for:

- Improved linking, reporting, and analysis of state/territory and federal optimal care data to allow for better understanding of variations and gaps in cancer care pathways.
- Greater collection and reporting of metastatic breast cancer data at a national level to understand the complex health needs of this growing patient group and the implications for our health system.

3. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020)



► Recommendation six: Best use of telehealth

Those impacted by breast cancer have reported the benefits of more flexible care delivery through telehealth, which has helped to bridge gaps for those who are geographically isolated and/or vulnerable to COVID-19. However, BCNA does not consider telehealth an appropriate replacement for face-to-face care wherever possible, particularly for those receiving a cancer diagnosis or with inadequate access to digital technology. We welcome the long-term commitment to telehealth announced at the end of 2021 but continue to advocate for further investment to fully realise telehealth's potential and consider how optimal care can be maintained regardless of how it is delivered.

We call for:

15. Increased funding for digital infrastructure to support higher quality telehealth service delivery, especially in rural and regional areas in lieu of rural and regional item loading on the Medicare Benefits Scheme.
16. Increased Medicare Benefits Scheme subsidies to support delivery of cancer follow-up care via telehealth.
17. Development of national best-practise guidelines for telehealth with specific attention to appropriate use of telehealth for delivering optimal cancer care in the absence of face-to-face consultations.

An activated network

BCNA has and always will be ready to work with policy makers to understand the needs of those being treated for and living with breast cancer. While our healthcare systems aim for patient-centre care, breast cancer lived experience is often left out of policy development, leading to duplication and a confusing system for those diagnosed with cancer.

Our network understands the impact of policy decisions and how policy translates into action at a local level, and BCNA is committed to fully realising the benefits of consumer voices informing these policy decisions.

Lessons learnt during the COVID-19 pandemic also mean we know that evidence-informed policy action can have meaningful and immediate impacts when implemented with consumers at the centre.

We welcome you to contact us to discuss our calls for action in more detail. To request a meeting please contact CEO Kirsten Pilatti via email at kpilatti@bcna.org.au or Director Policy Advocacy & Member Support Vicki Durston via email at vdurston@bcna.org.au.

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