

Media Release
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Bowel Cancer's 'Forgotten 360' – When Will the Government Act to Save Them?

“The government is turning its back on hundreds of New Zealanders in their fifties, condemning many to an unnecessarily early grave” – that’s the strong message from Bowel Cancer New Zealand.

“We call them ‘The forgotten 360’ – the 12% of New Zealanders diagnosed with bowel cancer every year aged between 50 and 59” says Bowel Cancer NZ spokesperson and University of Otago Professor Sarah Derrett. “That’s 360 New Zealanders in the prime of their working and family lives denied a timely diagnosis via screening which could make the difference between life and death”.

Bowel Cancer NZ is now calling on the government to act and deliver on two key demands: for all New Zealanders in their fifties to be screened for bowel cancer by 2025; and for Māori in this age group to be screened immediately.

It says while every single one of the ‘The Forgotten 360’ deserve immediate inclusion in nationwide screening, the higher percentage of Māori diagnosed in this age group are a cause for special concern – as 22% of Māori diagnosed with bowel cancer are in their 50’s (compared to 12% for New Zealanders overall).

“All New Zealanders aged between 50 and 59 are an urgent priority for bowel cancer screening, to bring this country into line with other countries such as Australia and England” says Professor Derrett. “However the higher percentage of Māori diagnosed in this age group can no longer be ignored. A worrying number are presenting late with more advanced stage 3 or 4 cancer, significantly lowering their chances of long-term survival. This coalition government has made a commitment to reducing inequities in health outcomes for Māori, so it is high time it ‘walked the talk’ and screened Māori aged 50-59 as an immediate priority”.

Bowel Cancer NZ medical advisor, public health clinician and Invercargill GP Dr Sue Crengle agrees.

“It’s accepted that bowel cancer develops earlier in Māori than non-Māori” she says. It’s not known exactly why more Māori bowel cancer occurs in this younger age group, but it’s just a fact. The government acknowledges the figures proving this, yet frustratingly, still refuses to act. As a result, the screening programme which it continues to roll out nationwide is inequitable and actually discriminatory towards Māori”.

Health workers, researchers and organisations including the Cancer Society, the Māori Medical Practitioners Association and the Māori Party also support Bowel Cancer NZ’s call.

Bowel Cancer NZ says the Ministry is well aware that screening from age 50 for all New Zealanders is optimal, due to the fact the six year Waitemata pilot screening programme included all adults in the

50-59 age group. Yet, it says, the Ministry has specifically excluded this younger age group when rolling out nationwide screening.

“The justification the Ministry used, then and now, is that this ‘hard call’ was necessary because our District Health Board’s don’t have the workforce capacity to deal with the extra cases that screening New Zealanders from age 50 would require” says Professor Derrett. “During the six years of the Waitemata pilot the Ministry clearly indicated they were committed to building up that workforce capacity. It’s clear that was a hollow promise. The National Bowel Cancer Screening Review released in 2018 showed that initiatives to address the workforce shortfall have repeatedly stalled. That represents six years of inaction while hundreds of New Zealanders in this age group were effectively given a death sentence. It beggars belief the Ministry has dropped the ball on this, because we know screening is not only life-saving but it saves health system and tax-payer dollars.”.

Bowel Cancer NZ says the call to immediately lower the bowel screening age is among several urgent issues identified in BCNZ’s new ‘Call to Action 2025’, to mark the organisation’s 10th anniversary.

“It’s widely known that New Zealand leads the world in bowel cancer, with more of us losing the battle with this insidious disease each year than die on our roads” says Professor Derrett. “How much longer should adults in their fifties and their whānau have to suffer while successive governments sit on their hands and avoid life-saving and cost-cutting screening?”.

ENDS

Bowel Cancer Stats

Every year around 3000 New Zealanders are diagnosed with colorectal (bowel) cancer and 1200 die. 12% of bowel cancers are detected annually in New Zealanders aged 50-59 years. For Māori 1 in 5 (22%) are diagnosed in this age range. That equates to 60 Māori patients. 39% of NZ’ers are diagnosed aged 60-74 years (the current screening age). In 2014 alone there were 120 NZ deaths from bowel cancer in the 50-59 age

Bowel Cancer New Zealand encourages open discussion about bowel cancer with medical professionals and avoiding ‘sitting on your symptoms’. Symptoms include:

- Bleeding from the bottom or seeing blood in the toilet after a bowel motion;
- Change of bowel motions over several weeks without returning to normal;
- Persistent or periodic severe pain the abdomen;
- A lump or mass in the abdomen;
- Tiredness and loss of weight for no particular reason;
- Anaemia.