



Media Release

Thursday 29 July 2021

Health system failing young bowel cancer patients

Bowel Cancer New Zealand is launching their Never Too Young campaign for the fourth year, increasingly concerned by the number of young people misdiagnosed or on long waitlists to access diagnostic bowel screening.

Bowel cancer survivor Chelsea Halliwell, the organiser of the campaign and a Bowel Cancer NZ ambassador, says young New Zealanders are still slipping through the cracks of a severely underfunded health system.

Halliwell says, “I am absolutely devastated that we are still hearing of young people like Jo McKenzie-McLean, 43 and Hope Benns 42 who, despite seeking help for their bowel cancer symptoms, were turned down for diagnostic bowel screening because they were considered too young.”

Professor Frank Frizelle, a Bowel Cancer NZ medical advisor says, “Bowel cancer is increasingly prevalent in younger people. In New Zealand, research has shown that among patients aged under 50 years, the incidence of distal colonic cancer in men increased by 14 per cent per decade, while the incidence of rectal cancer in men increased by 18 per cent and that in women by 13 per cent.

“Within the next decade, it is estimated that 1 in 10 colon cancers and 1 in 4 rectal cancers will be diagnosed in adults younger than 50 years. As a result, health professionals should consider when seeing individual patients, the need to do further tests, no matter the age of the patients, should they present with rectal bleeding, change of bowel habit and stool consistency.”

Every year, more than 350 people under 50 are diagnosed with bowel cancer. This year the Never Too Young campaign will highlight the patients and families behind these numbers through a viral social media campaign.

“We need people to understand that bowel cancer can strike at any age and that sometimes you need to advocate for yourself because, in many places, our health system isn’t up to it. So, if you have symptoms, get to your GP immediately, and make sure you get some answers,” says Halliwell.

Bowel Cancer New Zealand general manager Rebekah Heal agrees.

“The Never Too Young campaign drives home how important it is for everyone of any age to know the symptoms of bowel cancer. These include bleeding from the bottom; a change of bowel habit;

any lumps in the stomach; fatigue or tiredness; anemia and unexplained weight loss.”

The campaign runs entirely with pro bono support and features ten brave young people who all have had bowel cancer. Sadly, four have passed away since the campaign first ran.

Bowel Cancer New Zealand encourages avoiding ‘sitting on your symptoms’ through open discussion with medical professionals who have seen it all before and seeking a second opinion if still concerned.

END

Bowel cancer 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 in the abdomen
- A lump or mass in the abdomen
- Tiredness and loss of weight for no particular reason
- Anaemia.

More information on bowel cancer and Bowel Cancer New Zealand can be found at
<http://www.bowelcancernz.org.nz>

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About Bowel Cancer New Zealand

- Bowel Cancer New Zealand is a patient-focused charity organisation.
- The registered charity was founded in 2010 by a group of people affected by bowel cancer, committed to improving bowel cancer awareness and outcomes for people with the disease.
- Bowel Cancer New Zealand aims to provide clear and up-to-date information about the disease, symptoms, what to do if diagnosed and supports patients and whānau affected by bowel cancer.
- The ultimate aim of Bowel Cancer New Zealand is to prevent lives from being lost to this disease and to promote the national screening program rollout in New Zealand.