



Media Release

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Cancer screening cut decision 'certain to cost Kiwi lives' says charity

Bowel Cancer New Zealand (NZ) is concerned by the sudden decision to end bowel cancer screening for 50 to 60-year-old Māori and Pasifika communities in the Waikato, Tairāwhiti, and MidCentral regions. The move raises serious questions for New Zealanders about the government's delivery on reducing bowel cancer-related deaths.

The government's apparent decision to cancel this critical screening programme is in stark contrast to Prime Minister Luxon's pre-election commitment to lower the national bowel screening age to 45, in line with Australia's screening policy. This change puts lives at risk and is hard to reconcile with the government's repeated emphasis on the need for earlier, more equitable access to screening.

Peter Huskinson, Bowel Cancer NZ Chief Executive, says, "It is hard to fathom how a programme that has been fully funded for the entire country since 2022 and is proven to save lives would be abruptly cancelled – especially without a formal statement in the House. This decision is even more puzzling considering the government's own estimates, which state that this screening programme, once nationwide, is expected to save 44 lives each year.

"Dr Reti and Christopher Luxon have both previously expressed a clear commitment to addressing bowel cancer screening inequities, so it is hard to understand why they would allow such a reversal. This decision, if confirmed, will mean unnecessary suffering and deaths for our Māori and Pacific communities. Deaths that could have been prevented with proper screening at the right age."

In response to this decision, Bowel Cancer NZ is calling for immediate clarification and urges the government to explain who made the decision and the rationale behind it. New Zealanders deserve to know why such a vital screening programme has been put on hold.

Huskinson says, "We want to see a moratorium on the withdrawal of this programme until the government provides full clarity on its position. Families deserve to know they are not facing higher risks from undetected cancer during this critical period of uncertainty."

Bowel Cancer NZ medical advisor Professor Sue Crengle says, "More Māori and Pasifika bowel cancer is diagnosed before age 60 years. As a result, these groups had less opportunity to benefit from bowel cancer screening than other ethnic groups. Starting screening for Māori and Pasifika people at age 50 years meant that the benefit from the programme was equal across all ethnic groups. It would be incredibly disappointing if this has been stopped."

END

Further information:

The Prime Minister's Earlier Commitment

Just a few months ago, in response to concerns about the stalled rollout of the bowel cancer screening programme, Health Minister Shane Reti confirmed that the government remained committed to lowering the bowel screening age for all New Zealanders. Dr Reti also publicly stated that he expected to see advice on how to achieve this within months. This commitment was reiterated in meetings between Dr Reti and Bowel Cancer NZ clinicians and cancer survivors.

Why Earlier Screening Matters for Māori and Pasifika

Bowel cancer rates have been steadily declining in New Zealand over the past 20 years, largely due to early detection through screening. The national age-standardised rate of bowel cancer has decreased by 22%. However, Māori and Pasifika populations have not seen any reduction and face a disproportionate risk of death from bowel cancer. Māori, in particular, are diagnosed with bowel cancer an average of 10 years earlier than the general population.

A standard screening age does not adequately address the increased risk that Māori and Pasifika communities face. For these populations, earlier screening is essential to ensure they are not left behind. The evidence shows that a "one-size-fits-all" approach to bowel cancer screening does not provide equal protection.

Bowel Cancer NZ calls on the government to implement more targeted screening to ensure equitable access to life-saving services. This approach aligns with the charity's core belief that all New Zealanders should receive the same level of protection at the point they are at equal risk.

Bowel Cancer NZ's Commitment to Equity

At Bowel Cancer NZ, we are committed to addressing all inequities in the diagnosis and treatment of bowel cancer in Aotearoa, including ethnic, gender, geographical, disability, socio-economic, and financial inequities. We continue to advocate for a targeted approach that upholds the principles and values of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, ensuring that all communities, including Māori and Pasifika, are supported in their health journey.

As we move forward, Bowel Cancer NZ will continue to work with communities, health professionals, and policymakers to ensure that all New Zealanders have equal access to bowel cancer screening, particularly those who face the highest risk.

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

For further information:

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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, and what to do if diagnosed and supports patients and whānau affected by bowel cancer.
- Bowel Cancer New Zealand aims to prevent lives from being lost to this disease and promote the national screening program rollout in New Zealand.