

Patient counsel

Professors Barton and Olver have examined ways of improving elements of cancer treatment in Victoria (The Sunday Age, 13/07/03). A copy of their report has been circulated among the state's leading cancer specialists. Has it also been circulated to people who are currently being treated for cancer and their families?

Surely people with cancer should be included in decisions about their cancer treatment. Or is it acceptable for health care professionals, policy makers, and hospital managers to make these decisions on behalf of those who have cancer?

When people have cancer, 'experts' within the health care system often assume control of treatment decisions. While health care 'experts' may have expertise in medical care, surely those who have cancer are experts about their own lives. As such, they are often able to make decisions about their own lives. This includes decisions about their own care and treatment.

The health care system needs to better support people to play an active role in making decisions about their cancer treatment. Although this requires the provision of high quality health care services, it also requires the provision of information about options. Without being aware of options, people living with cancer often have no choice but to accept the health care professionals' 'expert' opinion.

If the draft report is circulated to people with cancer and their families, the Professors may be surprised by the feedback.

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