

MEDIA RELEASE

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Local cancer trials one step closer with appointment of trials nurse

A clinical cancer trials unit has been established at Toowoomba Hospital's Regional Cancer Centre.

Dr Khageshwar Pokharel, clinical director of cancer care services at Toowoomba Hospital, said local access to trials would provide tremendous benefits for eligible patients. The trials will be carried out with support from the Princess Alexandra Hospital, Prince Charles Hospital, and Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital.

"We know that patients who get enrolled in clinical trials are likely to have a better outcome than those who don't, so with that in mind a local clinical trials unit seemed logical," Dr Pokharel said.

"With cancer treatment it's a very rapidly changing and evolving field of medicine and in the last few years we have seen a lot of new cancer drugs coming through.

"There are standard drugs available through the pharmaceutical benefits scheme (PBS), and then there are others that are not on PBS and the only way to access those has been through clinical trials.

"Traditionally trials have been run through larger metropolitan hospitals so for local patients who want to be involved, this has meant a lot of traveling back and forth to Brisbane.

"Many of our patients already travel considerable distances to have treatment in Toowoomba, so even if they were eligible to enrol in trials, for some it has not been a viable option."

Dr Pokharel said the creation of a clinical trials unit had been made possible thanks to the generosity of the Toowoomba Hospital Foundation.

"Last year Andrea Barber, nurse unit manager of the Regional Cancer Centre, presented a proposal to the board of the Toowoomba Hospital Foundation (THF)," Dr Pokharel said.

"The THF board saw the merit in having a trials unit based here in Toowoomba, so we are very grateful for their generosity in providing the funding to allow us to set up a clinical trials unit and appoint Liz Ratcliffe to the position of clinical trials nurse.

"Liz has been doing some specialised training in Brisbane and we have been going through the paperwork to get all our preparations finalised so we are confident that we will have our first trials underway before the end of the year."

Toowoomba Hospital Foundation CEO Alison Kennedy said THF looked forward to seeing the clinical trials unit up and running.

“The Toowoomba Hospital Foundation is extremely proud to support the establishment of a trials unit at the Regional Cancer Centre at Toowoomba Hospital,” Mrs Kennedy said.

“We believe having access to trials locally will improve the quality of life of patients by reducing the financial and physical stresses associated with constant travel to Brisbane, and providing treatments that may have been unavailable to them previously.”

Dr Pokharel said the trials program would start with a focus on some of the most commonly occurring types of cancer.

“We are going to be looking into the more common cancers so we’ll recruit patients into trials for the four most common cancers we treat which are breast, colon, lung and prostate,” he said.

“It’s very hard to say exactly how many people we will be able to involve but these are common cancers so that is where we’ll focus.

“We will be doing what are known as ‘phase three’ trials which is the last step in the trials process.

“Phase one involves the very early testing where the safety of the product is tested, followed by phase two, where the correct doses and efficacy of the drug are established.

“By the time a new drug gets to the third phase it will have already been through many years of testing, so we know it should help the patient.”

Additional information:

- The \$9.55m Regional Cancer Centre was opened at Toowoomba Hospital in July 2012.
- The Regional Cancer Centre treats patients from a vast geographical area that goes well beyond the boundaries of the Darling Downs Hospital and Health Service, and covers over 300,000 square kilometres.
- Patients are seen from as far north as Kingaroy, east as far as Laidley, west beyond Charleville, out to the Northern Territory and South Australia border areas; and down into north western New South Wales.
- Inpatient services are provided in Ward 6D, which is our state-of-the-art cancer care ward, and a key part of the Regional Cancer Centre. Ward 6D provides specialist services to oncology, haematology and palliative care patients. The ward itself is a 24 bed ward, and such is the demand for cancer care services that it constantly runs at full capacity.
- Our cancer care service has three oncologists, two haematologists and one palliative care physician on staff, plus our nurse unit manager, three cancer care coordinators, a palliative care clinical nurse consultant, clinical facilitators, and a dedicated team of clinical, registered and enrolled nurses. We now have a specialist prostate cancer nurse, and a clinical nurse consultant who specialises in pain minimisation.
- Oncology Outpatients and the Day Oncology Unit are located on Level 4 of Toowoomba Hospital’s Surgical Block.

- Oncology Outpatients consists of seven consult rooms and two nurses' observation rooms. A seventh consult room was recently refurbished to cater to the increased demands on the outpatient service
- The Day Oncology Unit caters for outpatient chemotherapy. It is staffed to provide 10 chairs for chemotherapy.
- Our cancer care service also provides palliative care to assist patients in the terminal phases of their illness.
- Palliative care is provided with an emphasis on maximising quality of life, while facilitating patients' choices, particularly when patients wish to pass away at home.

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