

National bowel screen program saves lives

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(Medical Xpress)—Flinders University health experts are calling on the Federal Government to accelerate the roll out of the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program (NBCSP), following a landmark report which shows it will lead to a significant drop in colorectal cancer mortality.

The study – published yesterday in the *Medical Journal of Australia* – provides unprecedented evidence to show that the program is one of the most effective weapons in the fight against Australia's second-

commonest cancer.

The NBCSP was introduced in 2006 by the Federal Government, initially offering every Australian turning 55 or 65 years of age a free faecal occult [blood testing](#) kit that they could use in the privacy and convenience of their own home.

The recent [Federal Budget](#) has provided for a slow expansion of the NBCSP with 50 and 60-year-olds now being invited and 70-year-olds to be included in 2015. By 2035 it is planned that every Australian between 50 and 74 will be offered a free screening kit every two years.

However, Flinders Professor of Global Gastrointestinal Health Graeme Young (pictured) said that, in view of the new report which shows that people who take part in the program have a much better [prognosis](#), the government must accelerate the program's full expansion.

Using data from the South Australian Cancer Registry and the NBCSP register, the study found that of the 3481 people aged 55-75 who were diagnosed with [bowel cancer](#) in South Australia between 2003 and 2008, those who completed the test had their cancer detected much earlier than those who did not.

The study compared cancers diagnosed in people offered the NBCSP test to cancers diagnosed in people of the same age range who were not invited to the program.

The number of people completing the test who were diagnosed at an incurable stage of the disease dropped from 12 per cent to three per cent while the number of people with highly-curable cancers doubled, from 20 per cent to 40 per cent.

"This is a landmark study in Australia because it not only shows that

bowel cancer screening does work when organised in this fashion but that it will have a significant impact on the burden of this disease to the community," Professor Young, based at the Flinders Centre for Innovation in Cancer, said.

"While concerns have been raised in the past about the accuracy of the test and the willingness of people to participate, the reality is that it works," he said.

"It's also the first time that anyone in the world has been able to prove, using data from whole-of-population cancer registries, that this simple but advanced-technology screening test can provide such benefit."

As the prognosis for bowel cancer is largely stage dependent, Professor Young said the program allowed more patients to be diagnosed at an earlier stage of the disease and therefore treated sooner, which ultimately improves survival rates.

"About 80 Australians die every week from colorectal (bowel) cancer and that need not continue.

"So why wait until 2035 before everyone who should get the test, gets it?"

Provided by Flinders University

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