

Study looks at the burgeoning cost of cancer in New Zealand

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The cost of treating cancer in the New Zealand public health sector is more than \$800 million annually – hundreds of millions higher than previous estimates, according to University of Otago research.

Researchers from the University's Department of Public Health, based in Wellington, have used a new method to calculate the total cost of treating [cancer](#) in the [public sector](#), including costs by cancer type.

They calculated that the total cost of treating cancer in the [public health system](#) was \$880 million, which is 26 percent greater than the Ministry of Health estimate (of \$526 million) for the same period (based on data collected between 2010 and 2011).

According to the research, the cancers that the most [public health](#) dollars are being spent on annually are: colon (15%); breast (14%); and prostate, non-Hodgkin lymphoma and leukaemia (each at 6%).

The researchers found the cost varied greatly by cancer type. Melanoma is one of the cheapest cancers to treat at \$8000 per diagnosed and treated case, whereas leukaemia, which costs on average \$95,000 a case, is the most costly.

The lead author of the study, Professor Tony Blakely, says while the amount of money spent per cancer case was about the same for women and men, there was a noticeable difference in terms of how much was spent based on patient age.

"For example we spend more on 45-year-olds than we do on 85-year-olds. This suggests that the health system is working even harder to save younger lives through more actively pursuing such treatment options as surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy."

Professor Blakely says he supported the introduction of more preventative measures that targeted known cancer causes.

"New Zealand has done a good job in many areas of cancer prevention by increasing tobacco control through taxes and law changes, and by increasing the tax on alcohol. The introduction of anti-cancer vaccines for human papilloma virus (HPV) and hepatitis B, and occupational health strategies such as banning asbestos imports, are other preventative measures that are helping in the reduce the cancer burden but much more could be done – especially in accelerating progress towards achieving the Government's smokefree goal by 2025."

Professor Blakely says there is a need for a national bowel cancer screening programme, especially since such programmes have proved to be cost-effective internationally and because [colon cancer](#) was the most costly [cancer type](#) overall.

Study co-author, Associate Professor Nick Wilson, from the University of Otago, Wellington, says it makes sense to introduce preventive measures that target New Zealand's obesity epidemic because it would lower the cancer burden and help curb the country's burgeoning healthcare bill.

"There are things that can be easily done by taking the food industry to task on food labelling, portion size and advertising junk food to kids. Then there is the issue of taxing unhealthy food. Without a doubt the Government should be following other countries and looking at a tax on sugary drinks as a start. It would not only save in terms of obesity and

cancer costs but help in the fight against diabetes – a particularly expensive disease."

Provided by University of Otago

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