

Breast cancer survivors left with lifelong financial burden

August 25 2016

A Macquarie University study into the financial cost of lymphoedema borne by women who have survived breast cancer has highlighted significant out-of-pocket, life-long financial costs adding further burden to women who have already faced so much.

Lymphoedema causes swelling, pain and heaviness in affected limbs which can substantially limit a patient's activities of daily living as well as directly impacting on the costs to the individual due to the need for increased medical and therapist consultations. In addition, compression garments, which are required for routine management are currently not reimbursed by Medicare and health funds provide limited coverage.

According to the research, published in this week's *Psycho-Oncology*, the average out-of-pocket expenses for women living with BCRL is \$977 per annum and can be in excess of \$1400 for moderate or severe [lymphoedema](#).

Lead author on the study, Professor John Boyages from the Macquarie University Health Sciences Centre has found that 80 per cent of patients with BCRL indicated that their diagnosis has resulted in significant out-of-pocket financial costs.

Lymphoedema is a feared complication of breast cancer and impacts the physical, functional, psychological and social well-being of patients after treatment.

Melinda Flowers, who has BCRL said, "Each year my out of pocket costs for lymphoedema are considerable. I estimate I spend well over \$2000 per year on garments alone and often feel self-conscious about wearing my arm sleeve which can be quite uncomfortable to wear."

"To survive and defeat breast cancer and then be diagnosed with lymphoedema is a hardship that many women find challenging to reconcile, both mentally and physically. To then be hit with the added financial burden required to treat this life-long condition is a further slap in the face," said Professor Boyages.

"The financial impact of living with BCRL cannot be underestimated. In addition to the added medical costs lymphoedema can increase the impact on employment and career, which can also affect finances. It is critical that the issue of out-of-pocket expenses and other [costs](#) associated with lymphoedema are properly understood and evaluated to help shape policy for health insurers and Government," he continued.

In a cruel twist of fate as the number of [breast cancer](#) survivors increase with more effective treatments, the number of patients with long-term side-effects, including lymphoedema of the arm and breast, also increases. The incidence of BCRL can be more than 50 percent in cases with axillary node dissections and nodal irradiation.

More information: John Boyages et al. Financial cost of lymphedema borne by women with breast cancer, *Psycho-Oncology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1002/pon.4239](https://doi.org/10.1002/pon.4239)

Provided by Macquarie University

Citation: Breast cancer survivors left with lifelong financial burden (2016, August 25) retrieved

14 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-08-breast-cancer-survivors-left-lifelong.html>

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