Youth C*ncer

AWARENESS MONTH

MEDIA RELEASE: Too young. Too serious. Too urgent - Canteen calls for urgent action as aggressive youth cancer rates climb

14 APRIL, 2026. Canteen Australia is sounding the alarm on a growing national health crisis this Youth Cancer Awareness Month, with data showing an alarming rise in aggressive cancers among young Australians, and inadequate awareness of the signs, symptoms, and long-term consequences of a diagnosis between the ages of 15 and 25.

Australia now leads the world in young-onset bowel cancer rates. A statistic Canteen CEO Siona Hardy says should be treated as a call to action.

"We are seeing an alarming and undeniable rise in aggressive cancers in young Australians, and we cannot afford to look away."
Siona Hardy, CEO Canteen

KEY STATISTICS

50%	Up 266%	40 years	$1.3M
Rise in youth cancers since the '80s.	Rise in bowel cancer in young Australians.	No improvement in sarcoma survival rate.	Lifetime cost of a youth cancer diagnosis.

Symptoms dismissed, diagnoses delayed

A recurring theme among young cancer patients is the normalisation of symptoms.

Holly, 24, was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia at 17. "*I didn't pick up on any signs because they could all be brushed off as regular things for a teenager,*" she said. "*I didn't know anything was wrong until I got a cold which became worse each day until I was extremely unwell*."

Rianna, 23, was diagnosed with brain cancer after years of worsening headaches, dizziness and nausea. Her symptoms were repeatedly misdiagnosed. *"When I found out I had a brain tumour, it almost felt like a relief. Finally I had evidence that something wasn't right. I wasn't imagining it."*

Ben, 22, postponed seeing a doctor about a lump on his foot during exam season. *"I was in Year 11 and felt a lump at the bottom of my foot. But exams and Christmas meant I didn't want to see a doctor about it. Plus, it didn't hurt that much."* Ben has now had an above-knee amputation.

Dr Vivek Bhadri, Canteen spokesperson and adolescent oncologist and head of Youth Cancer Services at Westmead and Camperdown, warns that awareness of cancer in young people remains critically low: "*Australians need to realise that there is no specific symptom to suggest sarcoma, and sarcomas are one of the leading causes of cancer-related death in this age group.*"

Not paediatric. Not adult. Where do they fit in?

Young people with cancer occupy a clinical and emotional no-man's land — too old for paediatric care, too young for adult oncology systems designed around a different kind of patient.

Dr Bhadri is unequivocal: "*Youth cancer patients are not well served by traditional paediatric or adult models of care, and it is imperative they receive age-appropriate care from medical, nursing and psychosocial clinicians with expertise in managing young people.*"

For Holly, the consequences were profound. Treatment left her so immunocompromised she could not see friends or family, quit netball, and had to drop out of high school. Five close friends she made during treatment died from their cancers before she reached remission.

"*I had to confront cancer at an age where you're not too young to understand the consequences, but not too old to have already thought about it happening to you,*" she said. "*Cancer survival needs to change from a privilege to an expectation*."

Invisible after treatment

Canteen spokesperson and clinical psychologist Dr Toni Lindsay, who specialises in youth cancer patients, says the psychological impact of a diagnosis at this life stage is uniquely severe and often invisible to the world.

Dr Lindsay warns that survivors are significantly more likely to experience mental health difficulties long after treatment concludes, including a persistent sense of lost time and inability to catch up with peers. "*After treatment, there can be this period of invisibility*," she said. "*Just because they're looking well doesn't necessarily mean that headspace wise they're feeling well*."

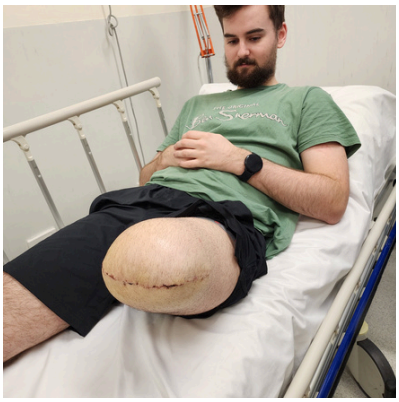
Rianna reflects this experience directly. "*I wish people knew that things aren't necessarily all good after you've survived treatment*," she said. "*You aren't the same as you were before.*"

Sustained funding critical to keeping services alive

Canteen is urging the federal government to commit to sustained funding of Youth Cancer Services as funding is not keeping pace with need. The estimated lifetime cost of a single youth cancer diagnosis is $1.3 million, a figure Hardy says makes investment in dedicated services not just morally necessary, but economically sound.

"*Without sustained funding, we risk dismantling a world-class system that has taken years to build and that young Australians depend on*," she said. "*No young person should slip through the cracks of our health system because their cancer falls between the paediatric and adult worlds. That gap needs to close*."

Holly credits the availability of clinical trials and age-specific services with saving her life: *"It's only thanks to advances in research and the implementation of clinical trials, like the one used to treat me, that I am alive."*



Ben. "I was in Year 11 and felt a lump at the bottom of my foot."

Holly. "My symptoms could all be brushed off as regular things for a teenager."

Rianna. "When I found out I had a brain tumour, it almost felt like a relief."

About Canteen Australia
Canteen Australia supports young people aged 15–25 who are living with cancer, as well as their families and friends. Canteen delivers psychological, social and peer support alongside Australia's Youth Cancer Services network, and advocates for policy and funding that reflects the unique needs of young people facing cancer.

Media enquiries

Youth cancer is one of Australia's most urgent and under-reported health stories. We welcome media inquiries and can facilitate interviews and provide photographs. We have a range of spokespeople available for interview, including clinical experts, Canteen's CEO, and many young Australians with lived experience of cancer.

Young people with lived experience
Ben, 22: Diagnosed at 17 with alveolar rhabdomyosarcoma after dismissing a lump on his foot during Year 11 exams. Ben has faced extensive chemotherapy, a below-knee amputation, then an above-knee amputation. A passionate advocate for youth cancer patients and Youth Cancer Services. "I was in Year 11 and felt a lump at the bottom of my foot. But exams and Christmas meant I didn't want to see a doctor about it. Plus, it didn't hurt that much."

Holly, 24: Diagnosed at 17 with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia after symptoms were brushed off as typical teenage tiredness. Treatment forced her to drop out of high school. Five close friends she made during treatment died from their cancers. Holly is now in remission and credits advances in research and clinical trials with saving her life. "I didn't pick up on any signs because they could all be brushed off as regular things for a teenager."

Rianna, 23: Diagnosed at 17 with Medulloblastoma brain cancer following years of misdiagnosed symptoms. A talented dancer and sportswoman, Rianna underwent surgery and chemotherapy and now serves as an Observer Director on Canteen's Board. "When I found out I had a tumour, it almost felt like relief. Finally, I had evidence that something wasn't right. I wasn't imagining it and I wasn't going crazy."

Clinical spokespeople

Dr Prasad Cooray: Melbourne-based medical oncologist and founder of Yarra Oncology, with a focus on gastrointestinal malignancies and a particular expertise in early-onset bowel cancer. Available to speak to the rising incidence of young-onset bowel cancer and why it is a biologically distinct disease.

Dr Vivek Bhadri: Adolescent medical oncologist and lead of Youth Cancer Services across the Westmead and Camperdown campuses in Sydney. Available to speak to age-appropriate cancer care, sarcoma in young people, and the case for specialist Youth Cancer Services.

Dr Toni Lindsay: Clinical psychologist with specialist expertise in youth cancer patients. Available to speak to the psychological impact of cancer on young people, the hidden struggle after treatment ends, and the long-term mental health consequences of a youth cancer diagnosis.

Canteen

Siona Hardy, CEO, Canteen Australia: Available to speak to the urgency of the youth cancer crisis, the human and economic cost of diagnosis, and the case for sustained federal funding for youth cancer.

Media contact

For interview requests, media assets and further information:
Louise Stewart, 0421 584 155, louise.stewart@canteen.org.au