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Illawarra doctors fighting to help the cancer patients Medicare doesn't fund

By Kate McIlwain
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Bruce Ashford, Dr Takako Eva Yabe, Dr Michael Davis, Dr Tanya Selak Dr Trevor Gardner, Dr James Wykes and Jenny Mitchell are celebrating 15 years of operating on head and neck cancer patients in Wollongong. Picture supplied

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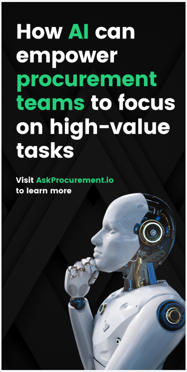
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Wollongong surgeon Bruce Ashford doesn't like to compare cancers, but - after 15 years operating on hundreds of Illawarra residents with various types of head and neck cancer - he can't help but feel his patients are hard done by.

"Breast cancer is terrible, but you can hide the scars of breast cancer, or bowel cancer, or any other type of cancer, but with head and neck cancer the scars are on your face or they're on your throat," he said.

"Unlike every other type of cancer, you can't hide it because it's on your face or it's in your mouth and it affects your ability to socialise, to talk, to eat, to cough, to swallow, all those things."

Despite this visibility, Associate Professor Ashford said head and neck cancer rarely receives the funding and attention it deserves.

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That is why he and a team of other Wollongong clinicians - who are celebrating 15 years of working together - are leading the push for change.

Their big focus is that Medicare does not cover the costs for head and neck cancer patients to receive prostheses which can improve their quality of life.

"A prosthesis for an amputated leg is [covered], a breast prosthesis is [covered], but not head and neck ones," Prof Ashford said.

An Illawarra contingent went to Canberra last week to lobby for facial prosthetics to be included in a Medicare-style scheme, so patients don't face huge barriers after being cured of cancer.

"Head and neck surgery has the greatest cost to patients you could ever imagine," Prof Ashford said.

"But these people just push on, despite all the things we have to do to them to cure them of their disease.

"I don't know many starving surgeons, but if you told me I could have a new ear for $15,000 and that would have to be replaced every three years, I would still have trouble paying for that.

"So how are we expecting our patients from across the Illawarra to pay for it?"

Gilmore MP Fiona Phillips raised this in parliament earlier this year after she had a benign oral tumour removed, nothing that Medicare "of course covers the removal of oral tumours in hospital".

"But if your tumour removal means cutting into your jaw, nose or face, Medicare does not cover the reconstruction, so you might not be able to do simple and very necessary functions like eating and speaking," Ms Phillips said.

"If you have breast cancer or prostate cancer, Medicare does cover the cost of a reconstruction, which is great, but, if you have head and neck cancer, Medicare does not cover a reconstruction with technology available. My grievance is: this needs to change."

Illawarra riders at the Ride Beyond Five event. Picture supplied

Still fighting for better care

Until 2009, patients who needed complex microsurgical reconstruction after head and neck cancer needed to travel to Sydney.

Prof Ashford, who led the push to establish a local surgical team, said there was initially resistance but after a public campaign involving some of the patients it would help, it went ahead.

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The team now performs about 50 complex surgeries a year in Wollongong's public and private hospitals.

"We've probably done about 700 major reconstructive cases, which involve what we call a free flap - where you take a bit of someone's body from somewhere else and put it into a defect in the jaw or the face or the mouth or the skull," Prof Ashford said.

"It's a great credit to the hospital and to the community for supporting us, and it's a reflection of the training that we all had.

"We have people come here from around the world to train now, and we speak internationally and train other surgeons internationally, so we're giving back in a way."

Anesthetist Tanya Selak has been part of the complex microvascular reconstruction surgery team since the start and said she was proud so many Illawarra residents had been able to be treated near home since 2009.

"Over the years, we've become much faster, much more efficient and we've developed such a high-trust team," she said.

"I'm responsible for keeping patients safe whilst they're anesthetised, and the operations themselves might last four, or six or 12 hours depending on the complexity of the operation."

'A natural consequence of taking your job seriously'

As well as celebrating the 15-year milestone, the Illawarra's head and neck surgery team took part in a 100km charity ride this month to raise money and awareness about the illnesses they treat.

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Run by Head and Neck Cancer Australia, and organised by Prof Ashford and Wollongong aneathetist Trevor Gardner, the Ride Beyond Five event raises funds for research, advocacy and quality-of-life interventions like prosthetics.

Prof Ashford said all this extracurricular work was "just a natural consequence of taking your job seriously" for the Illawarra clinicians, who hope to look back in 10 years and marvel at the advances in treatment.

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"For me, forever, this has been the least funded area of surgery and we feel, because we're biased, like these patients are the ones that do it the hardest," he said.

"I think if you talk to the breast surgeons or the breast care people from 30 years ago, they would probably have said the same things, like 'we can't get anyone to take this seriously, we can't get people to invest and recognise the loss that is related to the surgery we do'.

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"I feel like that's the stage we're at now, and our job is to advocate for our patients and their families and those people that are in their inner circle by increasing access to care and reducing the impact physiologically, financially, emotionally of that care."

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Kate McIlwain
Journalist

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