



## Call for exercise to be embedded into Australian cancer rehabilitation programs

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Exercise during cancer treatment has been shown to be associated with improved survival rates, pain management and quality of life and should be considered as an integral part of cancer rehabilitation programs, a national pain conference will be told this week.

Associate Professor Steven Faux, head of Rehabilitation and Pain Medicine at Sydney's St Vincent's Hospital was an author on a landmark cancer rehabilitation pilot study that examined survival rates of cancer patients who had been given a structured exercise program as part of comprehensive rehabilitation. He says exercise has been proven to help cancer patients recover, decrease complications like fatigue and pain and may improve survival rates.

Associate Professor Faux has thrown his support behind a fund raising drive spearheaded by breast cancer survivor and Sydney Bondi Iceberg swim club member Siobhan O'Toole and her medical oncologist Dr Sara Wahlroos to raise the profile of exercise in cancer and examine the protective effects of early exercise through "Pre-habilitation".

Ms O'Toole, who was diagnosed and treated in 2018 has raised more than \$25,000 to develop a free pilot exercise "prehab" program that has been developed by the St Vincent's oncology and rehabilitation teams for 20 cancer patients undergoing treatment. A bespoke program will be created for each patient designed by a specialist physiotherapist and will cover exercise, nutrition and mental health.

The impact of exercise and comprehensive rehabilitation on cancer patients and survivorship will be discussed by Associate Professor Faux at the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) Faculty of Pain Medicine's annual Spring Meeting in Bryon Bay on Saturday, October 19.

Associate Professor Faux's St Vincent's Hospital study was the first Australian research to find that patients who responded to exercise as part of a rehabilitation program were more likely to have longer life spans and become independent. Exercise has also been shown to be beneficial in helping cancer patients recover from treatment, control blood pressure, improved mood and heart and lung capacity. The study of 73 cancer patients of all types between 2005 and 2012 found that regular exercise benefited patients' muscle and bone strength, capacity to take a prolonged walk, live independently and allowed survivors the choice of returning to work.

"Exercise has been shown to be improve immunological status, fatigue, quality of life, independence and mood in cancer patients," Associate Professor Faux explained.

"Different cancers affect people differently and modern treatments are more easy to tolerate, so perhaps we need to start exploring how some forms of cancer act more like a chronic disease than a terminal one."

In Sydney, Ms O'Toole was enrolled in an exercise trial led by Dr Wahlroos as part of an ongoing PhD study on the impact of weight bearing exercise for breast cancer patients. Ms O'Toole underwent chemotherapy, surgery and, finally radiation. Throughout her six months of treatment she did regular bouts of resistance exercise with weights and this helped her maintain crucial muscle mass which can be severely depleted during treatment with surgery, chemotherapy and radiation.

“It really is quite simple because we know that exercise can improve survival rates by as much as 31 per cent,” Ms O’Toole said.

“Why can’t we incorporate exercise into the rehabilitation of cancer patients?”

Associate Professor Faux said while there was often a fragmentation of support services for those with cancer, pain management services could offer an entrée to coordinated rehabilitation that included exercise, psychological support and dietetic support.

“While the effect size from rehabilitation and exercise on reduction in pain may be small, the impact on quality of life independence and fatigue can be substantial, no matter what stage of the disease is addressed,” he explained.

The St Vincent’s study examined survival rates of cancer patients and found that regular exercise benefited patients’ muscle and bone strength, blood pressure control, mood and heart and lung capacity.

“Functional improvement achieved through inpatient rehabilitation was associated with prolonged survival among cancer patients,” the study found.

At the end of the study’s follow up period 37 per cent of the cancer patients had survived, with those responding more quickly to exercise more likely to have prolonged survival.