

With myeloma incidence rates on track to more than double by 2035, the Leukaemia Foundation is urgently stepping up its advocacy for Australians battling the blood cancer by calling for more treatment options to be added to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

As Myeloma Awareness Month (May) launches, Leukaemia Foundation CEO Chris Tanti said the organisation is harnessing the opportunity to champion improved access to two new therapies for myeloma with the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC) to improve quality of life for the 18,000 Australians already living with this blood cancer and the thousands more expected to be diagnosed with it in coming years.

The Leukaemia Foundation will make submissions to PBAC for selinexor (Xpovio®) in combination with bortezomib and dexamethasone, to treat relapsed and refractory myeloma, and, separately, in combination with dexamethasone to treat myeloma for patients who have received at least four other therapy options. The organisation is also again repeating its push to see elotuzumab (Empliciti®) listed for use in combination with lenalidomide and dexamethasone for treatment of relapsed and refractory myeloma.

"Just five months ago we celebrated the news that for the first time in 13 years, a new type of medicine targeting myeloma – daratumumab – was being made available on the PBS to support patients as a second line treatment option. This was a fantastic and important win which the Leukaemia Foundation strongly advocated for," Mr Tanti said.

"But there is still a high unmet need for new myeloma treatment options. It's clear the national spotlight is shifting its focus to this area, and as the leading national authority for blood cancer, we are committed to building momentum and improving access to therapies under PBS for people living with myeloma.

"We are buoyed by the recent gains that have been made, but we are walking this journey all the way with every Australian living with myeloma. We won't rest until all myeloma patients have equitable and affordable access to the treatment options they need, wherever they live."

Myeloma is a complex blood cancer affecting the body's plasma cells, which produce antibodies. Myeloma develops when plasma cells undergo a cancerous change and multiply at an increasing rate, taking over the bone marrow. It most commonly occurs in people aged 40 and older, and it is slightly more prevalent in men. Patients experience weaker bones which are more prone to breaking, as well as bone pain, kidney damage, frequent infections, anaemia and increased bleeding and bruising.

Currently, 2,339 people are diagnosed with myeloma each year, however it is expected 4,952 people will be diagnosed with this type of blood cancer in 2035. Sadly, 1,054 Australians already lose their life to myeloma each year, and this figure is projected to triple by 2035 – increasing to 3,037 people. ^{1 2}

"While treatment options and survival rates for some blood cancers are improving, the sad reality is that myeloma is an incurable disease which becomes progressively harder to treat after each relapse as patients become refractory to different treatments, so the impact of a diagnosis of myeloma on peoples' lives and the ongoing affect to their health remains severe," Mr Tanti said.

"Securing affordable access to new, innovative treatment options can truly turn the tables for some myeloma patients in what can be a long fight against this debilitating blood cancer. The right treatment can mean less side effects and improved quality of life.

"We are proud to stand beside Australians living with myeloma to be their voice and fight to get them access to the best treatment options, wherever they live, as we work with the broader blood cancer community towards the shared vision to see zero lives lost to blood cancer by 2035," he said.

The Leukaemia Foundation is committed to empowering Australians living with myeloma with access to the best information, support, treatment and care so they can manage its impacts and live well with their blood cancer.

The Leukaemia Foundation provides free practical, emotional and educational support to Australians diagnosed with a blood cancer including myeloma. The Leukaemia Foundation produces a series of disease specific newsletters including Myeloma News, and invites all Australians living with the disease to subscribe to ongoing information here.

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1 https://www.leukaemia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/State-of-the-Nation-Blood-Cancer-in-Australia_Leukaemia-Foundation.pdf

2 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/cancer/cancer-data-in-australia/contents/summary>

Blood cancer signs and symptoms: Symptoms of all blood cancers can sometimes be subtle or even similar to other conditions, such as a flu. However, ongoing symptoms like recurrent infections, increased fatigue, night sweats, bone pain, bruising or enlarged lymph nodes should be immediately discussed with your GP or specialist. Early diagnosis can play a key role in surviving blood cancer, so it is crucially important that you are examined and treated properly. If you or someone you love is diagnosed with a blood cancer, reach out to the Leukaemia Foundation on 1800 620 420. Accessing our support is free of charge.

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