

## **Employment and Work Outcomes of Singaporean Cancer Survivors**

Cancer is on the rise over the years, and more people are living with cancer than ever before. Cancer survivors have been reported to face challenges as they return to work. However, most studies examining work outcomes among cancer survivors have been conducted in Western countries. Therefore, there is a need to assess work outcomes of Singaporean cancer survivors due to the differences in societal values and healthcare systems. Such data would be crucial for policymakers and administrators to develop appropriate policies and allocate adequate resources to fulfil the cancer survivorship care needs.

In this interview, A/Prof Lita Chew, Head of the Pharmacy Department at the National Cancer Centre Singapore, shared about her recent research with 500 cancer survivors, describing the work-related outcomes, including employment rates, absenteeism and presenteeism, among local cancer survivors.

### **Q1: How did you get interested in conducting a study on work-related outcomes of Singaporean cancer survivors?**

**A:** Studies from other parts of the world, such as the United States, Europe and Australia, have shown us that cancer survivors have poorer work outcomes when compared to individuals with no history of cancer. Some survivors face challenges re-joining the work force after completing cancer treatment and successfully defeating the disease. Others work for less hours or experience problems at the workplace that are due to complications of cancer or cancer treatment. Although similar anecdotes are often heard among our local cancer survivors, concrete data is lacking. This inspired our team of clinicians and researchers to design and carry out a study to collect data about work and employment outcomes in the cancer survivor population here in Singapore.

### **Q2: Could you briefly introduce your study? What are the major research findings?**

**A:** We developed a survey to investigate the work outcomes among survivors of breast cancer, colorectal cancer and lymphoma. These types of cancer were chosen as they were highly curable and survivors were most likely to return to work. Our survey collected a vast range of information, including work status, working hours and work ability. Survivors who have completed treatment for at least 6 months and are currently in remission were approached to complete the survey.

We found that the majority of cancer survivors (slightly more than 60%) were in a full-time, part-time or self-employed position. Among them, more than half reported needing time off work due to ill health or to see a physician in the past six months while a smaller proportion experienced productivity loss at work due to health issues. Almost a quarter of cancer survivors who were not working when interviewed reported that they were unemployed due to health-related reasons .

**Q3: What are the research and clinical implications of this study?**

A: The proportion of cancer survivors being unemployed after cancer is similar to what most oncologist would observe in practice but whether these unemployment rates are due to toxicities from treatment or other reasons need to be further investigated. Our findings also highlight the importance of rehabilitation services to assist survivors in returning to work. More personalized back to work services for cancer survivors may also be necessary since the severity and type of problems cancer survivors face may be different.

**Q4: Do you have any future research plan based on this study?**

A: More research is needed to identify specific groups of cancer survivors who face more problems when returning to work. Potentially, these problems can be due to long-term residual complications from cancer treatment and future studies will be designed to understand the relationship between such complications and poor work outcomes among cancer survivors.

**(This study was funded by Singapore Cancer Society Cancer Research Grant.)**

**Researcher portfolio**

This study was completed by the team led by A/P Lita Chew, who is the Head of Pharmacy Department at the National Cancer Centre Singapore and an Associate Professor at the National University of Singapore. Her research interest includes palliative and supportive care of cancer patients. She has also published widely on medication therapy management and medication use among cancer patients. A members of her research team who has been extensively involved in this project is Mr Tan Chia Jie, an oncology pharmacist currently pursuing his PhD at the National University of Singapore.