BECOMING A SURVIVOR:

YOUNG PEOPLE DISCLOSING CANCER TO NEW ACQUAINTANCES AND ROMANTIC PARTNERS

Dr Peter Lewis* and Dr Ulla Mooney-Somers
The Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, The University of Sydney

Growing up with Cancer was a research study funded by the Australian Government that aimed to examine the impact of cancer illness and treatment on the transitions through adolescence and young adulthood. 48 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 young people aged 16 to 29 years who were diagnosed with various cancers and haematological malignancies when aged 10 to 22 years. Thematic analysis of interview data was conducted from a symbolic interactionist perspective.

What did we find?

- Most participants felt uncomfortable about disclosing their cancer history to new acquaintances.
- Some managed this by avoiding social situations in which they might be called upon to disclose their cancer history.
- Little is known about how young people choose to disclose their cancer history, the timing and methods of their disclosures and what the likely consequences of disclosure are for them as individuals and for the relationships that they seek to develop.
- Participants sometimes disclosed their cancer experience in the company of friends when new acquaintances entered an established peer group.
- Bill, whose leg had been surgically amputated to treat his osteosarcoma, now wears a prosthetic leg:

  "I went to another room [at a party] and then made a loud noise and I went down on the ground and then everyone was in on it except for this one guy and he came in and said, "What happened," and I had twisted my leg around and I was just screaming my head off and he almost cried [laughs]. (Bill, 18 years old)

- Overall, participants reported that their experience of disclosing their cancer history was better than they had anticipated.

What does this mean?

Young cancer survivors often progress from a time when disclosure of their cancer history is unavoidable, because of physical markers that cannot be concealed, to a time when they must choose whether to disclose their cancer history or not. Therefore the choices about disclosing a cancer history to new acquaintances are an important part of life after cancer treatment. But many young people fear that disclosure will provoke adverse responses.

As disclosure appears to generally go well, some young people who are early in their period of cancer survival might benefit from opportunities to explore disclosure strategies with more experienced survivor peers. Meetings between cancer survivors to discuss this can be facilitated by cancer support groups and by staff in oncology follow-up clinics.

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<th>Authors</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Peter Lewis* and Dr Ulla Mooney-Somers</td>
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The Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine
The University of Sydney

Email: GUWC.research@usyd.edu.au
Phone: +61 2 9386 3405

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<tr>
<td>The Centre for Values, Ethics, and the Law in Medicine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email: <a href="mailto:GUWC.research@usyd.edu.au">GUWC.research@usyd.edu.au</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone: +61 2 9386 3405</td>
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1 The Centre for Values, Ethics, and the Law in Medicine

* The Centre for Values, Ethics, and the Law in Medicine

Phone: +61 2 9386 3405