



## Serving People Affected by Cancer in Victoria, Australia- Cancer Connect in Victoria

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Every day in Victoria, Australia, 76 people are diagnosed with cancer. For every new diagnosis there are thousands more family and friends affected by the news. They, too, carry the burden of cancer and need support. While general information on different types and stages of cancer is available, individual needs such as concerns about treatments and impact on loved ones can often vary. Therefore, these can only be best addressed by peers sharing a similar experience- someone who knows cancer, rather than just knows about it. Understanding the demand of peer support and gaps in services, *Cancer Connect* in Victoria, Australia strategically utilizes a much targeted telephone-based peer support intervention, including trained peer-support volunteers (peer supporters) who have been through a similar cancer experience plus assistance in volunteer matching. Its experience could be helpful for programs targeting hard-to-reach populations or those with very specific needs.

*Cancer Connect* in Victoria, Australia is part of an Australian and New Zealand wide telephone-based peer support program, *Cancer Connect*. The program links people affected by cancer from all over Victoria- people with cancer, their parents and family care givers, and individuals with an inherited cancer gene- to a specifically-trained volunteer who has been through a similar cancer experience. The program, hosted by Cancer Council Victoria, has over 160 trained volunteers across a variety of cancer experiences. Since the *Cancer Connect* program first started it has changed significantly, now representing over 33 cancers, and will continue to evolve, providing a “friendly voice and an anonymous face” from someone who can listen, can understand; someone who has been there themselves”.

The peer-support volunteers are trained to listen to concerns and provide understanding and emotional support to help people through their cancer journey. In addition, practical advice on broad issues such as career, intimacy, or personal fatigue can prove invaluable for patients and their families alike. Depending on the support recipient’s needs and circumstances, the number of support calls can vary from 1 to 5 per volunteer for each of their referrals.

Peer-support volunteer recruitment and training is strategic and targeted toward addressing program areas of greatest demand and changing cancer treatments. *Cancer Connect* volunteers are, for quality assurance purposes and/or supportive care considerations, at least two years post cancer experience and must have successfully completed a three-day training program. They are also required to attend seven hours of ongoing training per year. Volunteers are asked to review their commitment in providing peer-support every two years as part of the program’s quality assurance process. The program’s quality assurance policies and procedures aims to maintain a high standard of peer support. The training curriculum for telephone peer-support volunteers covers their rights and responsibilities, the organization’s policy and procedures in addition to effective communication skills, active listening, and self care.

A key aspect of the program is liaising and working with other cancer organisations, health professionals and cancer treatment centres. The *Cancer Helpline*, which is heavily promoted, is a key entry point for accessing *Cancer Connect* peer- support volunteers. The trained oncology nurses, who operate the *Cancer Helpline* obtain information from the caller to assist matching a trained *Cancer Connect* volunteer who has had a similar cancer experience as the Helpline caller. In 2009, almost 1000 referrals were made to *Cancer Connect* volunteers.



# Peers for Progress

*Peer Support Around the World*

A program of the American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation

## Project Spotlight

Additionally, *Cancer Connect* highly value opportunities to learn from and exchange with other organizations, and have greatly benefitted from this type of activities. Since 2008, *Cancer Connect* been an active member of the [Chronic Illness Peer Support Network](#). This is a unique network by the Chronic Illness Alliance for organizations offering peer support programs in Victoria. The Peer Support Network was developed as a result of an identified need recognised by various organizations to provide a forum for members to support each other, share information and knowledge. In 2009, the Peer Support Network developed “ [Best Practice Framework](#)” which covers all aspects of developing and managing a peer support program. In October 2010, *Cancer Connect* in Victoria presented at the Peers for Progress global conference: *Diabetes, Peer Support, and Global Programs: Looking Forward with Peers for Progress and Broader Research Partners*, and is now also a member of the [Peers for Progress](#) global network for peer support organizations. The presentation can be found [here](#).

The program in Victoria has been formally evaluated three times since 2001 and has consistently found a high level of satisfaction among people accessing the service and its volunteers. Coinciding with the research, program participants often tell the Program Managers that speaking to a *Cancer Connect* volunteer helped them feel ‘reassured’ and ‘encouraged’. In March 2011, *Cancer Connect* Communication Skills training was conducted in Kuala Lumpur for the National Cancer Society of Malaysia and the Malaysian Ministry of Health. Positive feedback was received by the 80 participants consisting of doctors, cancer nurses, cancer survivors, carers and support volunteers. The success of the program also reflects on its ability to recruit new volunteers. Shared by 6 former support recipients who recently started volunteering, the choice to rejoin the program as a volunteer was made because they wanted to give back, and make a difference to someone affected by cancer because of the wonderful peer support that they had received themselves. As a volunteer-based peer support program, its dedication and ability to provide high quality of peer support has become a key to the program’s long-term sustainability.

*For more information, please contact:*

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Please also visit [http://www.cancervic.org.au/how-we-can-help/talk-to-someone-about-cancer/cancer\\_connect](http://www.cancervic.org.au/how-we-can-help/talk-to-someone-about-cancer/cancer_connect)