

BeyondCancer

Improving work and health outcomes for cancer survivors

A summary of the feasibility study of Beyond Cancer

A feasibility study of 'Beyond Cancer' was undertaken by a research team comprised of academics, industry experts, occupational rehabilitation, and voice of the consumer, funded by the National Breast Cancer Foundation. Published in Current Oncology, the study demonstrated feasibility for Beyond Cancer, including preliminary evidence for its effectiveness and high levels of acceptability for supporting breast cancer survivors to return to work and wellness. This summary paper provides an overview of the study and its findings.

Background/Aim

Every year in Australia, 140,000 people are diagnosed with cancer, of whom 40% are of working age. Relative survival rates are improving, likely due to better diagnostic methods, earlier detection and improvements in treatment (1), which means more people than ever are living with cancer.

For cancer survivors of working age, returning to work and social participation can be complex, with cancer survivors at greater risk of unemployment compared to the general population (2,3). Common barriers to return to work include fatigue, pain, cognitive impairments and fluctuations, anxiety and depression, emotional adjustment issues, fear of recurrence and treatment side-effects (4,5).

Beyond Cancer was developed to address a gap in breast cancer survivorship care, a lack of services specifically designed to improve work readiness and return to work outcomes for cancer survivors. The multi-modal rehabilitation program was co-developed by experts in vocational rehabilitation (IPAR Rehabilitation) and cancer survivor research (Curtin and Monash Universities) with additional expertise from Cancer Council NSW, the life insurance sector (Swiss Re) and the lived experience of a consumer. The program comprised four key elements, all cancer-informed and tailored to the population: health coaching for cancer survivors, employer education and support, collaboration with treatment providers including Exercise Physiology, and return to work planning and monitoring.

Methods

Funded by the National Breast Cancer Foundation, the research team undertook a feasibility study over a period of two years. 84 participants were referred to Beyond Cancer as part of the study. All referred individuals participated in the initial assessment, with 55 proceeding to the ongoing program.

A mixed-methods approach was used, capturing and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data. Outcome measures included:

- Pre- and post-program biopsychosocial assessment scores (Positivum assessment: Cancer) for those who completed a post-program Positivum assessment (quantitative)
- Return to work (RTW) status pre and post program (quantitative)
- Certified capacity pre and post program (quantitative)
- Participant program satisfaction surveys (quantitative)
- Participant interviews (qualitative)
- Consultant focus groups (qualitative)

Statistical analysis of a historical control group of cancer survivors was also completed to compare Beyond cancer to 'usual care' (standard occupational rehabilitation).

Results

Cohort characteristics

84 females with breast cancer were referred to Beyond Cancer over a two year period from February 2019 to February 2021.

- Average age was 50.81 years
- Two most common occupational sectors were **education and health**.
- Average time from diagnosis date to referral (where known) was 12.62 months (range 34 days – 32.6 months).

Program participation

- Average program duration was 33 weeks. This often involved intermission periods due to a combination of treatment and health-related issues, as well as delays associated with COVID-restrictions / concerns.
- 78.2% of participants engaged in the program in a multimodal manner (i.e. participated in at least 2 of the program elements) e.g. RTW support plus health coaching
- The most utilised program element was RTW planning and monitoring (71%), followed by health coaching (64%), and exercise physiology (47%).

Psychosocial outcomes

Statistical analysis of pre and post program Positivum assessment scores found a statistically significant improvement in 8 out of 11 factors from baseline to follow up.

The biopsychosocial factors showing the most substantial significant improvements were:

Physical fatigue improved by
23.5%

Pain improved by
24.2%

Expectations (i.e. confidence that they will be working in the near future) improved by
18.5%

Health Beliefs (i.e. beliefs about the impact that cancer and treatment is having on their ability to work) improved by
17.8%

General Health (thoughts about general health and quality of life) improved by
17.3%

Work capacity and return to work status outcomes

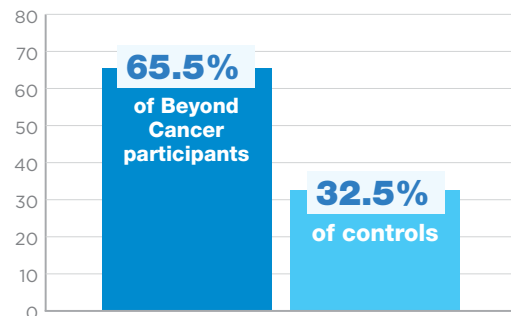
For Beyond Cancer participants enrolled beyond initial assessment (n=55, 65.4% of those referred):

- n=38 (69.1%) returned to work successfully with their original employer at either full pre-diagnosis hours and duties (n=16), or partial hours and duties (n=14)
- n=1 returned to work (1.8%) with a new employer at partial hours/duties
- n=5 (9.1%) were not yet working at 'case closure' (rehabilitation ceased and case closed due to claim related factors)
- n=11 (20.0%) were not working due to health or other circumstances (for this subgroup, RTW was deemed 'not applicable', or not viable, as to be expected for a proportion of this cohort).

When compared to a historical control group, Beyond Cancer participants had:

- Significantly greater improvements in work capacity, with 65.5% achieving an increase in work capacity compared to 32.5% of comparative cohort. This includes those for whom RTW was 'not applicable'.

Work capacity improvements seen in:



- Higher percentage (88.6% vs 80.82%), although not statistically significant, of positive RTW outcomes for Beyond Cancer compared to those from the historical control group.

Perceived effectiveness and acceptability

Program acceptability and satisfaction as measured by the Health Education Impact Questionnaire (HeiQ) was high, with 7 of the 8 participant survey respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that:

- They intend to tell other people that the program is very worthwhile
- The program helped them set goals that were reasonable and within reach
- They trusted the information and advice they were given in the program
- Their consultant was very well organised
- It was worth the time and effort to take part in the program
- Difficult topics and discussions were handled well by their consultant
- The program content was very relevant to their situation

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative data from consultant focus groups and participant interviews found that Beyond Cancer was seen as acceptable, beneficial, and relevant by participants and consultants delivering the program. The features of the program highlighted as most useful and relevant included:

- The multimodal nature of the program
- That the focus was holistic and about building work readiness (as opposed to solely RTW)
- The flexible delivery and tailoring to an individual
- The support, respect and understanding from consultants
- The utility of the health coaching in identifying key barriers and building work readiness

In addition to findings that spoke to the acceptability of the program, there were also some *learnings* or challenges arising in the qualitative data. These included:

- Difficulty surrounding the timing of referral and when to offer the particular components of the program; this is difficult to get right as the right time varies considerably from one cancer survivor to the next
- Opportunity to strengthen consultant training; some found themselves in situations where they felt underprepared especially regarding emotionally-laden or sensitive topics
- The potential for additional education and feedback for the referring case managers

Discussion

Of note, there was only a small (approximately 4%) positive, and not statically significant, change in the Work Support and Employer Perceptions factors. This likely reflects the high level of perceived workplace support at referral (baseline) for breast cancer survivors. As reflected in the qualitative interview data, the breast cancer survivors reported very positive workplace / employer support from the outset of their diagnosis and treatment.

Conclusion

Results from this feasibility study provide clear evidence of feasibility, as well as preliminary evidence that Beyond Cancer is effective in improving psychosocial outcomes and work participation for women with breast cancer; and is acceptable to consultants and survivors.

This project also demonstrates successful collaboration across industry and academia, and has made significant progress toward improving work, health and quality of life outcomes for breast cancer survivors.

Next steps

The evidence-based and consumer-informed Beyond Cancer program, including employer education material, is available for ongoing use and delivery through IPAR Rehabilitation across all service streams and cancer diagnoses.

It is anticipated Beyond Cancer could have a positive impact on the large employer and government sector by providing support to cancer patients of working age to develop work readiness and return to sustainable work. This remains an area for future opportunity, research and expansion.

References

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Expertise also sought from:

- Cancer Council NSW
- Occupational physician
- Breast care nurse
- Life insurance representatives
- Industry/union representative

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