

Introductory media release

A New Zealand-first campaign that kicks off in Rotorua next week hopes to see more people surviving lung cancer into the future.

The 'Cough cough cough' campaign is an awareness campaign about the early detection of lung cancer taking place in Rotorua between September and December 2010.

Sadly, Rotorua was a good place for the Midland Cancer Network to pilot this project with the Lakes District Health Board region having significantly higher lung cancer rates than other areas of New Zealand.

As it is, lung cancer has low survival rates; just 10 per cent of people diagnosed with lung cancer survive beyond five years of diagnosis. For Maori, the picture is worse at just five per cent survival beyond five years.

Rotorua Hospital respiratory physician Denise Aitken sees an opportunity to improve the lung cancer rates in the Rotorua community.

"It was a surprise to me when I first started working in Rotorua how many people with lung cancer I was seeing," she said.

"Over time, I also realised that many of these patients were presenting with advanced disease. I see new patients with lung cancer pretty much most weeks."

The project has been modelled on the success of a similar campaign with Britain's National Health Service.

"It is a push-pull model which will push people – particularly those with a smoking history – that have had a cough for more than three weeks, to see their doctor," said Midland Cancer Network project manager Diana Peers.

"At the same time we are working with health professionals to pull their at-risk patients in to see them, and getting health professionals to promote the early detection of lung cancer and encourage their patients to seek help earlier and enjoy their lives."

Early review of Lakes DHB's lung cancer presentations shows that many people have advanced lung cancer on diagnosis, which limits their treatment options.

Of 38 Lakes DHB patient records reviewed from 2009, 82 per cent of patients presented with stage three and four lung cancer, while curative treatment can only be given in the early stages of the disease.

Dr Aitken knows from experience that testing for lung cancer is a difficult process.

"Lung cancer investigations, diagnosis and treatment are incredibly difficult for patients and whanau. Often because of previous experience with family members, they feel very hopeless from the start.

"There is a real impact on the community of avoidable loss of those people from the input they have to their families and community either whilst they're being treated or if they do not recover."

However, for at least two Rotorua lung cancer survivors, the journey has been very different.

Alex McKenzie and Georgina Fraser, both of Rotorua, have agreed to support the campaign by telling their stories, which speak volumes about the importance of listening to your body and being vigilant with your health.

Both Mr McKenzie and Mrs Fraser were diagnosed in the early stages of the disease and are alive to tell the tale.

Dr Aitken says she doesn't know why people present at such late stages of lung cancer.

“Maybe their lives are busy, so they put off getting checked. Maybe they’re worried it’s bad news and think if they ignore it, it will go away – it won’t.

“Maybe they are used to putting up with less than good health and just don’t expect much. Maybe they have had bad experiences with the health system.

“I also think sometimes people feel bad about themselves for smoking and they shouldn’t.”

Western Heights Medical Centre GP Alistair McLean agrees with Dr Aitken but can’t stress enough how vital early detection is to survive lung cancer.

“If people are at risk of cancer they should see their family doctor or practice nurse for an assessment. If they’re worried, they can bring someone along to the appointment,” he said.

“People often present late in the illness because they think they just have a “smoker’s cough” – or because they are scared. Don’t be scared. Just get checked.”

You can learn more about the campaign and read Alex and Georgina’s stories at www.midlandcancernetwork.co.nz

Look out for promotion of the campaign throughout the Rotorua community over the next three months and if you or someone you love has had a cough for more than three weeks, see your family doctor.

ENDS