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Subject CanTeen and nib foundation provide cancer support for Brisbane youth

A new comprehensive support program for young people living with the diagnosis of a parent with cancer, or who are dealing with the loss of a parent to cancer, will be launched in Brisbane on Tuesday 17 May.

A first of its kind in Australia, the CanTeen Offspring Support Program has been developed courtesy of a \$1.5 million grant from nib foundation to provide a range of support services for these young people aged 12 to 24 years.

CanTeen CEO Andrew Young, said the ongoing increase in cancer rates in Australia, combined with a lack of targeted, age-appropriate mental health support services, has created a significant need for such a program.

“Having a parent with or dying from cancer can have a devastating effect on the lives of young people. On average, young people who have a parent with cancer show considerably more psychological distress than young people who have cancer themselves,” Mr Young explained.

“In Australia today there are 15-times more young-people who have a parent diagnosed with cancer, than young cancer patients. This combined with lack of appropriate counselling and support services, shows just how important this program is to our community.”

“CanTeen is extremely thankful for nib foundation’s support in partnering with us on this very important initiative. We know it will make a real and positive difference to the lives of so many young Australians,” Mr Young added.

Over the next three years the program will provide support to thousands of youth through the provision of a multifaceted program, such as specialised counselling service (face-to-face, telephone and online/email counselling), information resource/books and practical skills development, respite, recreation and peer support for young people struggling to cope with their parent's cancer.

Well when mum first told us she had cancer, I was a huge emotional wreck. I was only young and didn't really know what to do. When I went to visit mum for the first time she was just coming out of surgery. I tried not to cry but my sister did, so I did. Then after mum was out of hospital, she went back consistently for chemo and then mums hair had started falling out so she shaved it off. This was a huge event as I have never really thought of my mum the same since. - Corey [14] has taken responsibility of running the family household since his mother's cancer diagnosis and is determined to help other young people in similar situations through CanTeen's Teen Link peer support program.

For a long time I denied that Dad was gone and thought I could ignore it. Although, there was a big hole inside me that nothing could fill. Deep down I was devastated and didn't want to continue my life without Dad as he was meant to always be there, to watch me grow up, get married and have a family. I sheltered myself away from the world and didn't want to deal with anything or anyone... it was difficult to start a new life without him. - Natalie [20] was just seven years old when she learned her father had cancer. After almost eight years of watching her father struggle, she was sadly forced to say goodbye at just 15. Since then, she has used her experience to support and empower other young people living with cancer as one of CanTeen's most active Members, and President of the Sydney and Central NSW Division Committee.

It's not supposed to happen. You aren't supposed to have to worry about leaving school early because your Dad is dying from a brain tumour and there is no one to look after your younger sisters.- Ashlea [22], Hailey [20] and Emily [16] are three sisters who have been living with cancer in their family for over a decade. Both of their parents have had cancer, and their father died after battling a brain tumour for 12 months. As the eldest, Ashlea was forced to take on many responsibilities, from cooking the family meals to driving her father to appointments and her sisters to school.

In recent years it has been widely acknowledged that for this group, even without the complication of a cancer diagnosis in the family, there is a significant lack of targeted mental health support.

Australian of the Year, Professor Patrick McGorry (a leading international researcher, clinician and advocate for the youth mental health reform agenda) referred to the 12-24 year age group as “the weakest link in the public mental health system”.

Research conducted by CanTeen, in conjunction with the University of Sydney, has found that young people who have a parent with cancer report a complex array of needs, many of which go unmet. This group has also been found to be at significantly higher risk of psychological distress. It also showed that one in two people surveyed who had a parent with cancer reported levels of psychological distress that were severe enough to merit psychological intervention.

nib foundation Chairman, Terry Lawler said the program will make a demonstrable difference to the health and wellbeing of young people having a parent with cancer.

“The Offspring Support Program represents a commitment from both organisations to address severe psychological distress among young people and provide age-appropriate responses,” Mr Lawler said.

“The multifaceted program aims to significantly improve the wellbeing, resilience and coping mechanisms of these young people, many of whom have had to leave school early to work to provide a support role for the family, meaning they have little or no time for friendships or a social life. nib foundation is delighted to be able to partner with CanTeen to roll-out this outstanding program that will assist young people during their time of need,” Mr Lawler added.

The counselling service has also begun in other pilot areas in Sydney, Newcastle and Melbourne. If the program is successful, CanTeen will look to expand the program to offer a national service at the end of the three years.

MEDIA OPPORTUNITY

The Brisbane Offspring Support Program will be launched at 11am on Tuesday 17 May, 2011 at the CanTeen Queensland Office, 2/24 Light Street, Fortitude Valley.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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