

Improving rural cancer care

Judy Baulch

Research from Deakin University, in partnership with Cancer Council Australia, is aiming to reduce inequities in cancer care delivery across Australia.

"Cancer comes at a significant health care burden in Australia, particularly for rural and remote communities where cancer outcomes, including survival, are poorer," said lead researcher Associate Professor Anna Ugalde from Deakin's Institute for Health Transformation.

An expert in health services and oncology research, Assoc Prof Ugalde leads the Institute's Inequitable Cancer Outcomes across Rural and Remote Australia (ECORRA) research group which, in partnership with Cancer Council Australia, has been awarded a \$495,000 grant through the Cancer Patient Support Program funded by the Department of Health and Aged Care.

The funding will support the development of an Optimal Care Pathway tailored for people with cancer living in rural and remote areas, addressing a critical need identified in the Australian Cancer Plan.

Optimal Care Pathways are frameworks outlining consistent, evidence-based and best practice care. Developed through a multidisciplinary



Cancer patients in rural and remote Australia experience poorer outcomes compared to those in metropolitan areas. Deakin University Associate Professor Anna Ugalde, inset, is working to change that. Pictures: Adobe Stock, Deakin University

process drawing on best evidence to provide guidance and expectations for quality cancer care, there is international evidence that frameworks improve patient outcomes and they are a key part of the Australian Cancer Plan.

"The Australian Cancer Plan is a national strategy to enhance experiences and outcomes for all Australians affected by cancer, including their families and carers. It highlights opportunities and actions for the entire cancer

central system to work together so all Australians can receive the best possible cancer care," Assoc Prof Ugalde said.

"This funding will allow us to establish national guidance for the unique challenges faced by rural and remote cancer patients, who can experience poorer outcomes compared to those in metropolitan areas."

"Our goal is to reduce inequities in cancer care delivery across Australia."

The project is supported by a multidisciplinary team of national leaders in oncology and rural health, including Megan Varlow, a health policy and equity specialist, and Kate Whitaker, a health policy expert, both from Cancer Council Australia. Other key members include Deakin's Hannah Jongebloed, Dr Hannah Beks, Dr Rebecca Bergin, Dr Anna Chapman and Assoc Prof Steve Marshall, who all bring extensive experience in oncology, health services research, implementation science and rural health.

Through ECORRA, Assoc Prof Ugalde leads a program of health services research to promote best practice for cancer patients and their family caregivers, informing oncology clinical practice and government policy. Her research is conducted in partnership with community groups, health service organisations, clinicians, policymakers and people affected by cancer.

The research project is aligned with other established ECORRA projects delivering improved cancer care for rural and remote Australians, including a national, multi-state trial and a Victorian statewide survey exploring how to address the barriers to best practice care.

For more information, visit ecorra.deakin.edu.au or contact ecorra@deakin.edu.au