

The unmet needs of people with blood cancer across the United Kingdom

A review of existing evidence

The Blood Cancer Alliance commissioned an evidence review to enable a greater understanding around the key unmet needs of people with blood cancer, particularly when compared to people with other types of cancer. The term 'unmet need' can be defined as a deficiency in any areas of a patient's life that arises as a result of cancer or another chronic ailment.

The key findings are summarised below.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT

A blood cancer diagnosis, and blood cancer treatment, can have a very significant impact on patients' mental health. CPES data shows that **blood cancer patients are less likely to be offered information about psychological support than patients with other cancers** (86% to 88%). The contrast is particularly significant when comparing blood cancer patients with breast or prostate cancer patients (86% to 92%/91%).

The way in which a blood cancer diagnosis is delivered to patients is incredibly important. Sensitivity is paramount to supporting patients to deal with the emotional impact of their diagnosis. The percentage of blood cancer patients **reporting that their diagnosis was handled sensitively was lower than among patients with other cancers, and particularly when compared with breast cancer**. (Haematology scores: England 84%, Scotland: 86%, Wales 79%. Breast Scores: England 89%, Scotland: 89%, Wales 88%). Indeed, only 38% of patients reported to Blood Cancer UK in a 2019 survey that their clinicians were not definitely sensitive to their emotional needs at diagnosis.

While research has yet to be completed in the UK as to why the disparity in support for emotional and psychological patient need exists between cancer types, it is important we seek to close this gap. The complexity and uncertainty of a blood cancer diagnosis often leads to severe emotional impact on the patient. **It is unacceptable that they are less likely to be offered support than if their diagnosis was for a solid tumour cancer.**

DIAGNOSIS

Early diagnosis is critical to increasing the chance of positive outcomes in cancer treatment. This is as true in blood cancer as it is in other cancers. However, **blood cancer patients experience significantly worse delays to diagnosis than patients with breast, lung, colorectal and prostate cancers.**

It remains the case that **3 out of every 10 blood cancer (30%)** cases in England are diagnosed after presenting to the NHS as an emergency – when their disease is likely to have progressed and they have significant health complications. This is compared with just **3% in breast cancer, 7% in prostate cancer**, and 21% in colorectal cancer (Blood Cancer Dashboard data).

The number of patients who had to see their GP five or more times before being referred for specialist treatment is **double that of patients with other cancers in England** (5% vs. 10% CPES 2019), and nearly double in each of the regions.

The **disparity** between patients' experience of blood cancer diagnosis in comparison to other common cancers needs to be **addressed urgently** in order to improve blood cancer outcomes, and achieve equity of treatment of patients across the whole of cancer.

INFORMATION

Blood cancers are complex conditions, often with incredibly complex treatment options. It is vital that patients are able to understand their condition and their options.

This is why it is of concern that over **10% fewer blood cancer patients report that they fully understand their condition than those with solid tumour cancer**. There may be correlation between this and the fact that blood cancer patients are more likely to report that their test results were not explained to them in an understandable way, and are less likely to report that the potential side effects of treatments were explained to them.

There needs to be **greater focus on ensuring information is presented to patients with the same clarity as it is to other cancer patients**.

PUBLIC AWARENESS

Blood cancers are complex conditions, and symptoms are often difficult to identify by both patients and healthcare professionals. Despite that issue, only **one Government sponsored national cancer public awareness campaign has specifically mentioned blood cancer symptoms**. This is unacceptable, particularly in the context of the disparity in diagnosis times between blood cancer and other cancers.

FINANCIAL

Cancer has the ability to have a worrying impact on a patient's finances, as well as their physical health. Time taken off work to attend treatment is a major cause, as well as the sheer cost of attending hospital for treatment, and costs associated with adapting patients' lives and lifestyle to accommodate the physical impact of the disease and its treatment.

Blood cancer patients are likely to suffer a more significant impact on their finances than those with the big four cancers. The median impact on a blood cancer patients' finances is £181 per month, compared with £120 in breast cancer and just £52 in prostate cancer.