



VCCC Alliance
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VCCC Alliance Submission to the Australian Government Department of the Treasury

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VCCC Alliance members



The VCCC Alliance is pleased to submit this document outlining four priority areas in cancer research, treatment and care. The priorities consider the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as longer term needs to ensure Australia continues to support cutting edge research and achieve high survival rates for this devastating and costly disease.

About the VCCC Alliance

The Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre (VCCC) Alliance brings together leading medical research, academic and clinical institutions with a shared goal of improving outcomes for cancer patients.

Through the integration of cancer research, education and patient care, the VCCC Alliance is forging new approaches to translate research into enhanced care and treatments and ensuring they are made available to people affected by cancer, no matter where they live.

The mission of the VCCC Alliance is to harness the shared capabilities of its members to deliver better outcomes for cancer patients and to contribute to larger system changes to improve equity for patients so they can access the right therapies, in the right place at the right time.

The ten VCCC Alliance partners are the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, the Royal Melbourne Hospital, the University of Melbourne, the Royal Women's Hospital, the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, the Royal Children's Hospital, Western Health, St Vincent's Hospital with St Vincent's Institute, Austin Health with the Olivia Newton-John Cancer Research Institute, and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute. The Alliance is also affiliated with Bendigo Health and Albury Wodonga Health with further expansion planned.

Through innovation and collaboration, the VCCC Alliance is driving the next generation of improvements in prevention, detection and cancer treatment.

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Cancer remains one of Australia's biggest health challenges

Every Australian will be affected by cancer in some way. Cancer remains a leading cause of death in Australia, with one in two Australians expected to get cancer in their lifetime, and one in five dying from the disease. In 2021, over 150,700 people were diagnosed with cancer in Australia; sadly, more than 49,000 people are estimated to have died from the disease.

Advancements in screening, diagnosis, treatment, and management of cancer has resulted in vast improvements in overall cancer survival. New technologies, discoveries and better evidence-based care are extending lives and improving quality of life for people living with, and beyond, cancer.

Despite these advances, cancer remains a major health problem and the disparities are widening. Cancer type, where a person lives, their cultural identity, and socio-economic status can be key determinants of outcomes.

For example, in the period 2008 to 2014, the five-year relative survival rate for all cancers combined was 54 per cent for Indigenous Australians compared to 68 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians. Similar, but less stark, trends in cancer outcomes can be seen according to a person's geographic location and/or socio-economic status.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's *Cancer in Australia 2021* Report, cancer incidence rates for people living in the most disadvantaged areas were 5 per cent higher, survival rates were almost 20 per cent lower, and cancer mortality rates were over 40 per cent higher.

The VCCC Alliance model: unique and successful

The VCCC Alliance delivers a highly integrated, world-leading program of cancer research, education and clinical care across metropolitan, regional, and rural Victoria, with benefits extending beyond the state.

Founded on principles of research excellence, collaboration, and accelerated discovery and translation, the unique structure of the alliance reduces traditional boundaries and barriers. Strong connections across alliance members and other organisations support the development and implementation of bold, innovative programs and state-wide system change.

In recent years the VCCC Alliance has successfully delivered a long list of achievements including:

- increasing participation in clinical trials in both regional and metropolitan areas;
- establishing a cutting-edge, collaborative immunotherapy program in the Centre for Cancer Immunotherapy; and
- developing Australia's first Master of Cancer Sciences through the University of Melbourne, created by 180+ experts from across the VCCC Alliance.

The work of the VCCC Alliance as a powerful collective enhances cancer outcomes for patients through rapid translation of cancer research and building capabilities within the cancer workforce.

The VCCC Alliance does not deliver treatment directly to patients but through its collective impact model it plays a critical role enhancing and facilitating the development and application of better cancer care across and between its member organisations, achieving wide-reaching benefits.

Over the next three years, the VCCC Alliance is poised for future growth and impact expansion (scale and spread). The alliance aims to be recognised as a global centre of excellence in cancer research and evidence-based cancer care, with a key focus on reducing inequities in cancer outcomes.

Priorities

The VCCC Alliance has identified four key priorities in cancer to:

1. reduce the immediate and medium-term cancer health impacts of the pandemic;
2. improve the efficacy of government-funded cancer research;
3. harness the opportunity presented by shared data for research, and
4. utilise world class talent and resources to improve the survivability of deadly liver cancer.

Priority 1: Informing and assisting Australia's response to the pandemic-induced surge in cancer cases

As a result of reduced screening and reduced attendance for regular health checks during the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of undiagnosed cancers remain 'hidden' in the Australian community. Ultimately, these will appear in the health system and require care. It's feared many

may be further advanced as a result of delayed diagnosis, which will require more treatment and intervention, further exacerbating costs and pressures on the health system.

The VCCC Alliance has been actively working to mitigate this issue and stands ready to assist the Federal Government to respond to this surge in cancer cases. New programs and dedicated funding will be needed to support health services and providers during this extended and complex challenge. This will also need to be considered in the development of the *Australian Cancer Plan* due in 2023.

Since March 2020 the VCCC Alliance has been working in partnership with Monash Partners Comprehensive Cancer Consortium (MPCCC) to mount a united response to the challenges involved with managing cancer care amid the global health crisis. The Victorian COVID-19 Cancer Network (VCCN) is governed by an expert taskforce, to provide support and advice to clinicians and health care services treating patients with cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic; advocate for patient needs, and support the cancer workforce across the state.

The VCCN shares knowledge and experience, bringing together extensive knowledge from individual clinicians, government departments, institutions and patient advocacy groups across Victoria, Australia and internationally. A dedicated expert group led by Cancer Council Victoria ensures information is shared with patients, carers, and the community. Working consultatively with state government, this network brings together individuals from over 100 institutions creating a new and unique pool of knowledge, experience and resources.

Having successfully advocated for sensible and effective action to support patients and the workforce over the past two years, there is an opportunity for the VCCC Alliance, as the lead partner in the VCCN, to provide expert guidance and advice to the Australian Government to respond to this nation-wide challenge, which is expected to take years to address.

Priority 2: Strategic funding of medical research will better serve Australia and Australians

Traditionally, funding for medical research has been accessible through long-established, well-funded, and highly-sophisticated corporate-like organisations, often with limited geographic reach.

Transforming funding mechanisms to ensure they are more accessible to smaller medical research entities and clinics will not only enable a greater proportion of research to be conducted by pioneer laboratories at the cutting-edge of medical science; it will also improve equity of access to innovative care and treatment for disadvantaged cancer patients.

The VCCC Alliance is proud to lead a number of innovative and collaborative projects across its member institutions and locations, helping to foster research and increase access to clinical trials for patients living with cancer living in rural and remote areas.

The Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF), for example, could help build even stronger relationships between researchers, healthcare professionals, governments, and the community, by requiring successful grant recipients to:

- partner with other organisations to undertake its research and/or clinical trials;
- undertake at least some clinical trials in a regional area or areas;
- target participation in clinical trials by disadvantaged patients, including Indigenous Australians; and/or
- ensure research is conducted with a footprint and patient-impact beyond a single state or territory.

As demonstrated by the VCCC Alliance, there are clear benefits to harnessing the combined capabilities of medical, academic and clinical institutions so that Australia maintains a position as a trailblazer in research-led, consumer-engaged, cancer education, prevention, detection, treatment and care.

Funding medical research with a view to improving equity and fostering collaboration will better serve Australia and Australians.

Priority 3: A new National Cancer Data Strategy that drives efficiencies and improves equity in cancer care

While there is a wealth of data across the Australian health system, the inability for cancer services to access, share and learn from each other still inhibits the pace and translation of research and outcomes into policy and practice.

A new, future-focused National Cancer Data Strategy is required to improve and inform cancer prevention, early detection, treatment, and support for people affected by cancer.

Based on international models of best practice – such as the Canadian model, where state-based strategies are harmonised to create a national masterplan – a new National Cancer Data Strategy should establish linkages across Australia’s cancer sector to improve system resilience and any response to future health challenges (such as a pandemic).

Given the broad acknowledgement of the need and opportunity for a new National Cancer Data Strategy, its development could be led by a consortium of expert cancer organisations across Australia. The VCCC Alliance would be keen to contribute and participate. We anticipate that Cancer Australia would play a key leadership role in this, and the initiative would support implementation of the *Australian Cancer Plan* by offering a structure to promote collaboration and accelerated progress through data sharing, leading directly to better outcomes for patients.

Priority 4: Improving the survivability of liver cancer – a new Hepatocellular Cancer Research Unit at the Centre for Cancer Immunotherapy

The VCCC Alliance seeks \$5 million over four years to expand the work of the Centre for Cancer Immunotherapy and establish a new research unit with a focus on liver cancer.

The Centre for Cancer Immunotherapy is a major feature of the Ian Potter Centre for New Cancer Treatments at the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre in Melbourne. The laboratory is shared by more than 100 cancer immunology researchers and clinicians from across the VCCC Alliance members, working together to discover, improve, and translate immunotherapy treatments into clinical care for patients.

Immune-based therapies are revolutionising cancer outcomes, even in very advanced cases of diseases such as melanoma, lung cancer, and leukaemia.

At present, the five-year survival rate for liver cancer is just 14% for indigenous Australians; and 20% for non-indigenous Australians. Hepatocellular cancer also disproportionately affects Australians of East Asian origin. It is estimated that 2,832 Australians will be diagnosed with liver cancer this year alone, with men three times as likely to be diagnosed as women.

While Australia boasts enormous research and clinical expertise in metabolic, infective, and inflammatory liver diseases; and is a world leader in the science and clinical practice of liver transplantation; there is not a single major group working on liver cancer.

The VCCC Alliance proposes to establish a collaborative research program – harnessing Australia’s world-leading expertise in virology, metabolic liver disease, and cancer immunotherapy – to investigate the causation of liver cancer and the role of the immune system in the pathogenesis of the disease.

This new Hepatocellular Cancer Research Unit will also identify new ways to harness the immune system to develop much needed biomarkers of early liver cancer; and new classes of immune-based therapeutics to be tested in early-phase clinical trials, and ultimately to treat it.

The Hepatocellular Cancer Research Unit will collect, process, characterise, and store liver tissue donated by patients from Melbourne’s hospitals, and conduct a broad-range of research studies (including in-vitro studies on genomics, cell biology and biochemistry; patient-derived xenografts in mice; and pre-clinical mouse studies on biomarkers and therapeutics).

The indicative cost of \$5 million over four years will provide for tissue collection, laboratory research personnel, a part-time program coordinator, mouse facility, and consumables; leveraging existing laboratory space at the Centre for Cancer Immunotherapy:

	FY2022/23	FY2023/24	FY2024/25	FY2025/26
Budget (\$m)	0.8	1.2	1.5	1.5
Staff (FTE)	6.0	6.0	6.0	6.0

The VCCC Alliance believes this investment represents excellent value against the \$4.8 billion estimated annual cost of liver cancer to Australians each year (Deloitte Access Economics, 2021) and will establish Australia as a world leader in new immunotherapy approaches to liver cancer.

Expansion of the Centre will also align with the expected objectives of the *Australian Cancer Plan*, improving access to new cancer therapies and treatments, addressing cancers that disproportionately impact vulnerable communities, and reducing the financial burden of cancer.



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