



Cairns Bhutanese Community Inc.

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Cancer Awareness Session II delivered in Cairns, FNQ

On June 6, Saturday, delivered by Mahesh Upadhaya, a PhD researcher at James Cook University with a pharmacy background and international professional experience, the Cairns Bhutanese Community Inc. and Punya Foundation Inc. successfully conducted the second session of the Cancer Awareness Project at Centacare FNQ. The session attracted 43 participants—almost double the attendance of the previous session—highlighting growing community interest in health education and cancer awareness initiatives.

The session focused on bowel health, bowel cancer prevention, and the importance of participating in bowel cancer screening programs. The session was delivered in Nepali native language of the attendees to support community understanding and awareness of bowel health issues. Participants were provided with information about the digestive system, bowel cancer risk factors, symptoms, prevention strategies, and the National Bowel Cancer Screening Program available in Australia.

The presentation commenced with an overview of the digestive system and the role of the bowel. Participants learned that the bowel consists of the small bowel and large bowel. The small bowel is responsible for digesting food and absorbing nutrients, while the large bowel, including the colon and rectum, absorbs water from waste and helps remove waste products from the body. Understanding the structure and function of the bowel provided a foundation for discussing bowel health and disease prevention.

The session explained that bowel cancer develops when abnormal cell growth occurs in the lining of the large bowel, forming growths known as polyps. While many polyps are harmless, some can gradually develop into cancer if they are not detected and removed. Participants learned that bowel cancer often develops

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slowly over a period of 10 to 15 years, creating an important opportunity for early detection and prevention through regular screening. The presentation highlighted that bowel cancer is one of the most treatable cancers when identified at an early stage.

A detailed discussion was held regarding the common signs and symptoms of bowel cancer. Participants were informed that symptoms may include blood in the stool or on toilet paper, persistent changes in bowel habits, feelings of incomplete bowel emptying after using the toilet, unexplained weight loss, loss of appetite, ongoing abdominal pain or cramping, and symptoms associated with anaemia such as fatigue, weakness, and shortness of breath. It was emphasised that these symptoms do not necessarily indicate bowel cancer; however, individuals experiencing these symptoms should seek medical advice promptly to ensure appropriate assessment and treatment.

The presentation also explored the risk factors associated with bowel cancer. Participants learned that although anyone can develop bowel cancer, certain factors increase the likelihood of developing the disease. These include being aged 50 years or older, consuming an unhealthy diet high in sugar and saturated fats, being overweight or obese, smoking tobacco, excessive alcohol consumption, having Type 2 diabetes, and having a strong family history of bowel cancer. Particular attention was given to the increased risk among people with close family members diagnosed with bowel cancer before the age of 55 or those with multiple blood relatives affected by the disease. Participants were encouraged to discuss their individual risk factors with their general practitioner. A significant portion of the session focused on prevention strategies. Participants were informed that adopting a healthy lifestyle can help reduce the risk of bowel cancer. Recommended strategies included maintaining a healthy body weight, eating a nutritious and balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables, engaging in regular physical activity, avoiding smoking, and limiting or eliminating alcohol consumption. The importance of participating in regular bowel cancer screening from the age of 50 was strongly emphasised as one of the most effective methods of preventing bowel cancer and detecting abnormalities early.

Information was provided about the Australian National Bowel Cancer Screening Program. Participants learned that eligible Australians aged 50 to 74 years receive a free bowel screening kit every two years through the mail. The importance of

maintaining an up-to-date address with Medicare was discussed to ensure that screening kits are received without delay. Participants were encouraged to complete the screening test whenever they receive a kit, even if they have no symptoms, as bowel cancer can develop without noticeable signs in its early stages.

The presentation included detailed instructions on how to use the bowel screening kit. Participants learned how to safely collect a small stool sample using the materials provided in the kit, package the sample correctly, and return it for laboratory testing. Guidance was provided regarding hygiene, sample handling, storage requirements, and postage procedures. The session also explained situations in which testing should be delayed, such as during visible rectal bleeding, menstruation, acute illness, or shortly after certain bowel investigations such as colonoscopy.

Participants were educated about the meaning of screening results. A negative result indicates that no blood was detected in the sample and generally no immediate further testing is required, although regular screening should continue every two years. A positive result indicates that blood has been detected in the stool sample; however, this does not necessarily mean cancer is present. Participants learned that a positive result usually leads to referral for further investigation, most commonly a colonoscopy, to identify the cause of the bleeding.

The presentation provided a comprehensive overview of colonoscopy procedures. Colonoscopy was described as a diagnostic examination that allows doctors to view the inside lining of the colon and rectum using a flexible camera-equipped instrument. Participants learned that polyps can often be identified and removed during the procedure, helping prevent the development of cancer. Information was provided about preparation requirements, sedation, the examination process, and post-procedure recovery. The presenter reassured participants that only a proportion of people undergoing colonoscopy are diagnosed with cancer, as many positive screening results are related to non-cancerous conditions.

Throughout the session, participants were encouraged to take an active role in maintaining their bowel health and to seek professional medical advice whenever concerns arise. The presentation reinforced the message that bowel cancer is common but highly treatable when detected early. Regular screening, awareness

of symptoms, healthy lifestyle choices, and timely medical consultation were identified as the key strategies for reducing the burden of bowel cancer within the community.

Overall, the presentation successfully increased awareness of bowel health, bowel cancer prevention, and the importance of screening among participants. The information provided was practical, culturally accessible, and relevant to community members, helping build confidence in discussing bowel health and encouraging greater participation in preventative health programs. Participants were reminded that a simple bowel screening test can potentially save lives through early detection and treatment.

and emotional distress, supportive services are available to assist patients throughout their treatment journey.

The key message of the session was that many cancers can be prevented, detected early, and treated successfully. Regular screening, healthy lifestyle choices, sun safety, smoking cessation, and timely medical consultation can save lives. Community education and awareness are essential in improving health outcomes and reducing the burden of cancer in Cairns and across Far North Queensland.

Participants were also encouraged to access support services including local GPs, hospitals, Cancer Council Australia, Healthdirect Australia, and Cancer Australia for accurate information, screening, and ongoing support.



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