



Victorian Cancer Agency – Cancer sector survey 2009

Executive summary

In November 2009, the Victorian Cancer Agency (the Agency) undertook a survey of the cancer research sector's level of knowledge and satisfaction with the Agency. It was the first survey for the Agency. As such, the survey provides a base against which the performance of the Agency can be compared with over time.

A web-based survey was distributed to 452 people who had contact with the Agency between 2007 and 2009. 110 surveys were returned (24%).

Respondents were generally between 30 and 50 years of age (68%), female (51%) from metropolitan Melbourne (93%) and working in a health service (51%). Breast, Haematology, Genito-urinary cancers and Supportive Care and were their major research interests.

In Part 1 of the survey, views on overall satisfaction with the Agency were sought. Overall satisfaction was at 43%, with 15% dissatisfied and 40% neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Satisfaction levels varied by whether the respondent had been funded or not: levels of satisfaction were significantly higher (70%) for funded respondents than non-funded respondents (15%). Interestingly, the level of satisfaction with the Agency rose over the three years since the Agency began project funding: 2007 respondents (40%), 2008 (68%) and 2009 (75%). The aggregate satisfaction level of all respondents also differed across the three metropolitan Integrated Cancer Services, WCMICS (49%), SMICS (35%) and NEMICS (17%): this may in part reflect the funding success by ICS.

In Part 2 of the questionnaire, respondents were asked a series of questions about expectations and perceptions of Agency focus and priorities: what "it is" compared to what "it should be". There was generally close alignment between what should be the Agency's focus (expectations) and what it is (actions): with actions below expectations between 10% and 25% across the range of issues. Areas of highest recognition and also closest alignment between actions and expectations were in relation to a) the Agency existing to fund translational projects that will improve patient outcomes (79%) and b) the Agency building research capacity (84%). The lowest level of expectation (20%) was for the Agency to determine the most important scientific questions in cancer.

By examining the gap between respondent expectations and Agency actions, opportunities for improvement were identified. There were three areas where the need for improvement by the Agency was highest: a) investing in research infrastructure, b) taking a role in policy setting for cancer research and c) translating knowledge to change clinical practice based on research evidence. In all these three areas Agency actions were 25% below respondent expectations of the role the Agency should have – showing a desire for improved activity by the Agency.

In Part 3 of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate their assessment of the Agency in relation to its importance in cancer research, its role in generating funding and its performance in providing feedback to the sector about its research outcomes. While over 80% were satisfied with the Agency's performance on the first two questions, the Agency's performance in communicating was satisfactory to only 29% of respondents.

In a series of questions about the role of the Advisory Council, it was identified that there are high levels of uncertainty about the role of the Advisory Council itself within the

overall work of the Agency. Given the unique role of the Council, there is clearly a need to communicate its responsibilities more widely with to sector.

In part 4 of the survey, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements about the processes used by the Agency in managing its funding rounds. In these questions a clear and consistent pattern in response emerged, again closely dependent on whether the respondent had been successful or not in their application.

- The primary areas of concern for those successful in funding were around timing – either the timing of rounds, or the time available to make application. There was also concern about the transparency of evaluation processes and feedback to applicants. These were concerns were an issue for between 10% - 12% of successful respondents.
- For those unsuccessful in their funding applications, there were two areas of significant concern identified: the adequacy of feedback to researchers on the funding decisions, and confidence in the transparency of the Agency's evaluation processes: (registering levels of dissatisfaction of 33% and 25% respectively).

Before leaving this section which identifies respondent concerns with key processes important to the Agency's credibility, it should be pointed out the actions taken by the Agency. Since 2009, all Agency funding round evaluations have been undertaken by independent interstate evaluators. In 2009, these panels were convened especially for the funding round, however, since 2010, the panels will become a standing panel of interstate experts – in place for 2 years. The Agency also acknowledges that the issue of feedback is important to researchers. Since 2009, the Agency has offered verbal feedback to any applicant on their request.

Future goals and initiatives

Using the 2009 Survey as a base level, it is the goal of the Agency to increase the level of satisfaction with the Agency in all key categories of its activity: specifically the Agency will aim to:

1. increase recognition of the Agency investment in research infrastructure
2. provide more information to the broader community about projects it has funded
3. improve awareness of feedback processes available to unsuccessful applicants
4. increase sector awareness of the particular roles of the Victorian Cancer Agency Consultative Council
5. improve interest in the work of the Agency among groups under represented in this survey, for example regionally based cancer researchers.

In particular, the Agency will undertake the following:

1. Provide information on its website that will be appropriate for both researchers and the interested public that provides:
 - a. Early notification of funding rounds
 - b. Details on the Evaluation Panels and our evaluation processes.
 - c. Information on the infrastructure investments that have been made and their rationale and expected benefits for cancer researchers.
 - d. Increased information on the research projects funded by the Agency and their likelihood of translation into changed clinical outcomes.
2. Develop a translational cancer research strategy to provide a policy framework for future investment in the sector within Victoria.
3. Clarify the opportunities available to applicants to receive feedback on applications. This will be published on the Agency's website, in research funding round guidelines and in correspondence back to applicants.
4. The Agency will undertake a repeat survey in 2010 to ensure that the Agency remains aware of the views of applicants.