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## **Poor management of workplace cancer claims exacerbates employee anxiety**

CANBERRA: Concerns about cancer clusters in the workplace could be resolved more expeditiously, reducing fear and anxiety among employees, a forum on cancer in the workplace was told today (10/12).

Associate Professor Tim Driscoll, from the University of Sydney's School of Public Health, said there was an understandable uncertainty by employers when it came to concerns about cancer clusters.

"Concerns naturally arise when several staff members are diagnosed with cancer, even though cancer is a common disease," Prof Driscoll said. "However, organisations can inadvertently make situations far worse than they needed to be, for both staff and management."

Prof. Driscoll, who investigated concerns about a cancer cluster at the National Gallery in 2008, as well as conducting a number of similar investigations, said most concerns could be reasonably quickly cleared up by following a systematic process focusing on exposures and emphasising communication and education.

"We need to take any claim of cancer in the workplace seriously, as many workplaces still have problem exposures that are not well controlled," he said. "However, if no carcinogenic (cancer-causing) exposure is identified, it is extremely unlikely that work-related exposures would be responsible for an apparent cluster of cancers. This has been the experience in a large number of studies around the world."

According to Prof. Driscoll, employers could help to avoid prolonged, costly, anxiety-provoking and sometimes adversarial situations by calling in an expert, such as an epidemiologist or occupational physician, early to talk with staff, assess the concerns and advise whether there is a need for further investigation. "This can ease concerns and avoid a cascading effect that may ultimately result in long-term problems for employees and the organisation."

Prof. Driscoll said the first step was to talk to the staff about their concerns, and to identify whether or not there was potential exposure to a known carcinogen. "If there is no clear exposure, the likelihood of a cluster is considerably diminished. That said, there are some other factors to consider.

"Where the reported number of cases appears high, one type of cancer predominates (especially if it is unusual) and the affected persons are predominantly younger, it may well be that the situation does merit more detailed investigation. Even so, it is important to understand that there is a random aspect to cancer, and this means that clusters of cases are expected, but that this occurs because of chance, not because there is a problem exposure."

Cancer Council Australia Chief Executive Officer, Professor Ian Olver, said that while all claims of cancer clusters merited some level of investigation, there was a need for more information and education for employers and employees, as well as better internal communication.

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