



Submission to the Victorian Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone



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Introduction

Cancer Council Victoria

Cancer Council Victoria is a non-profit organisation that has been leading the fight against all cancers for more than 80 years in the areas of research, patient support, cancer prevention and advocacy. Our mission is to prevent cancer, empower patients and save lives. Our 13 11 20 cancer information and support line is staffed by experienced cancer nurses who provide tailored information, and emotional and practical support to callers whose lives are affected by cancer and link them with a wider range of support programs.

This submission focuses on metropolitan public transport issues that may be experienced by people affected by cancer, after a cancer diagnosis.

About our submission

This submission responds to four of the Inquiry's five Terms of Reference:

- (1) The expansion of the free tram system;
- (2) Removing fares for all Seniors Card holders;
- (3) New technologies that enable intelligent transport systems that improve the performance of the networks; and
- (4) The effects and benefits of dynamic public transport pricing.

Context

Cancer Council Victoria believes that it is imperative that issues relating to accessing healthcare, including cancer treatment, are considered in the Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone. With one of the highest cancer survival rates in the world, Victorians are well supported by a high-quality healthcare system. The Victorian Government must ensure this system is complemented by an adequate and accessible public transport system. We positively support actions that reduce costs for cancer patients and their families.

Transportation barriers, including cost, can lead to missed appointments, delayed care, and missed or delayed medication use. This in turn can result in poorer health outcomes¹. The free tram network can reduce transportation barriers to treatment by reducing the cost of transport and easing the stress of ticket purchasing.

In considering changes to the public transport system, Cancer Council Victoria would like to highlight the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS). The financial barriers to travelling for medical treatment obviously affect a broad range of Victorians - not just those with cancer and their carers. This is why Cancer Council Victoria has been working for many years alongside the VPTAS Alliance, described below.

Extending the free tram zone to include stops at major public hospitals, free transport for seniors and new technologies that make transport easier are important initiatives the Cancer Council Victoria fully supports.

In the 2017/18 financial year, 206 million people used Melbourne trams. There is currently no clear data on how many visits people make to metropolitan hospitals for cancer treatment and follow-up care, but we know that more than 35,000 Victorians were diagnosed with cancer in 2018². We also know that 60 per cent of patient visits during the diagnostic phase were to metropolitan hospitals, and that 10 per cent of these visits are made by people who live outside the Greater Melbourne area³.

VPTAS Alliance

Cancer Council Victoria is the coordinating body for the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS) Alliance. Established in 2013, the VPTAS Alliance comprises more than 20 cancer, chronic disease and patient support agencies, all with a strong interest in supporting people who need to travel for treatment.

The VPTAS Alliance is committed to seeking further improvements to the scheme, and improving awareness of the support that the Victorian Government provides to regional and rural Victorians who need to travel for specialist medical treatment.

Extending the free tram zone

Cancer Council Victoria notes that three of Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre (VCCC) hospitals – Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, the Royal Melbourne and the Royal Women’s hospitals – currently lie one tram stop beyond the free zone along the City route. We welcome the inquiry to consider expanding the free tram system to this specialised cancer treatment centre hub. We also support the extension of the free tram zone to ensure patients being treated at the Alfred Hospital and the Royal Children’s Hospital can access free transport along this major public transport corridor.

We would encourage extending the proposed free tram zone further to enable patients attending St Vincent’s Hospital and the Royal Eye and Ear Hospital to access free transport.

Cancer Council Victoria has recently undertaken extensive consultations with more than 600 community members and health professionals about Victorian cancer issues. The cost of cancer: specifically, the cost of travel to and accommodation near cancer treatment centres – is a significant concern for cancer patients⁴. It is alarming that we hear reports from health professionals and the community that some patients decline to access critical treatments based on financial considerations. It is also reported that some patients make treatment decisions based on based on financial considerations, meaning they may forgo recommended medical care.⁵

Patients and support people may attend hospital for daily radiotherapy, with these visits often extending over several weeks or months. Patients receiving chemotherapy and targeted intravenous therapies will require regular visits to hospital that can extend up to 12 months or more. The cost of public transport for patients and carers can add up significantly over this time. People affected by cancer, in common with others with chronic conditions⁶, talk about the increasing transport out-of-pocket costs including:

- high costs of hospital car parking
- lack of free street parking or high cost of metred parking close to hospitals
- needing to fund taxis or other ride-sharing services from train stations to the hospital
- higher petrol prices.

A free tram to the hospital might encourage Victorians to leave cars at home and use public transport. It also takes much of the confusion out of the process of getting around the city or the stress of having to move cars to avoid fines when hospital appointment waiting times or treatment delivery times blow out.

The expansion will also support thousands of staff, volunteers and visitors to the hospitals, all of whom are integral to the care and support of people affected by cancer. Overcrowding and parking costs at Melbourne metropolitan hospitals are a burden for patients, carers and staff. In our recent community discussions to help inform our submission to the Victorian Cancer Plan 2020-2024, patients routinely identified parking as a source of distress that negatively impacts on their experience of care⁷. Providing affordable alternate transport options offers practical solutions to address these concerns.

We also note that some people affected by cancer may have accessibility requirements, and some are not able to manage an overcrowded tram. Provisions must be put in place to allow for this, including accessibility and increased seating options.

In expanding the free tram zone, Cancer Council Victoria has concerns around the inequity for cancer patients based on where they are being treated. Patients travelling to hospitals such as Monash Health in Clayton or Western Health in Footscray will not receive free public transport which may influence treatment location decision making and deter people from being treated closer to home.

Cancer Council Victoria acknowledges that concerns about congestion on free trams services have been already expressed by many Victorians. We note there is a need for free or low-cost access to other public transport options: for example, shuttle buses from nearby train stations. Cancer Council Victoria acknowledges the Victorian Government has demonstrated significant commitment to building a less crowded and more reliable public transport system through its investment in the Metro Tunnel. This project will provide direct access to the VCCC hospital precinct via the Parkville Train Station by 2025. Station entrances directly outside two of Melbourne's biggest cancer treatment hospitals – the Royal Melbourne Hospital and Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre will be an excellent outcome of this important public transport investment⁸. Trains are not included in the free public transport initiative, but we understand that congestion on trams will ease once the new Metro train service commences, making a free tram a more comfortable option for people with cancer needing to access this precinct.

Cancer Council Victoria community consultation, July 2019

My mum has been diagnosed with terminal cancer and we live in the outer metropolitan suburbs. It is extremely difficult for us, we spend 2.5 hours travelling every time for our specialist and surgical appointments in the CBD, especially when my mum is not in a great condition to travel for that long.

Metropolitan-based cancer carer, online survey, July 2019

Removing fares for all Seniors Card holders

Victoria's growing and ageing population make it imperative that we put in place structures and build a system that responds to the Victorian Government's long-term vision in cancer control. Cancer is more common in older Victorians (and nationally), with 72% of cancers (or 25,377 Victorians) diagnosed in 2018 detected among people aged 60 years or older⁹.

Cancer Council Victoria fully supports the removal of fares for travel on Melbourne public transport for Seniors Card holders. The initiative will be of great benefit to Victorians aged 60 years and over.

In offering a free service for seniors, it is expected that the uptake in use of trams, trains and buses by this population would increase. Provisions must be put in place to allow for this, including accessibility and increased seating options. Cancer Council was concerned by community feedback from our Wangaratta Victorian Cancer Plan consultations that buses replacing cancelled train services to Melbourne meant some elderly patients and those with disabilities could not be accommodated for leading to important cancer treatment appointments being missed.

We would also acknowledge the proportion of younger cancer patients affected by cancer and patients who are receiving welfare support through Centrelink due to their illness. Cancer Council believes it would be helpful to consider avoiding potential inequity by offering a further fare reduction for all patients on concession cards on top of the current concession rate.

Social workers tell us their patients may experience delays and challenges accessing Centrelink that mean they cannot access timely support. Some form of temporary assistance with public transport costs would help. Some suggestions include enabling social workers to provide a temporary concession card to vulnerable patients.

New technologies that enable intelligent transport systems that improve the performance of the networks

Many people affected by cancer live in regional and rural Victoria and attend medical and allied health services at major metropolitan centres. The Myki system is often confusing and the need to buy a Myki card for people living regionally may present an extra burden.

Cancer Council Victoria supports the implementation of new technologies that enable intelligent transport systems that improve the accessibility of the public transport system to people affected by cancer. Not having to buy a Myki card and just touching on with a credit or debit cards may alleviate the stress of pre-purchasing or topping up a Myki. The digital Myki, currently only available to Android users, illustrates the benefits to travellers of providing alternative payment options.

The effects and benefits of dynamic public transport pricing

We note dynamic pricing can be a tool to tackle congestion and overcrowding. People affected by cancer may not have alternative transport options. Cancer Council Victoria does not endorse dynamic public transport pricing that could see public transport fares go up for people affected by cancer. We advocate for more pricing transparency, and policy changes that reduce the overall transport costs for people affected by cancer, including mechanisms such as VPTAS.

Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme

VPTAS subsidises the transport and accommodation costs incurred by rural Victorians – and, if appropriate, their carers – who have no option but to travel a long distance to receive medical specialist services¹⁰. Past consultations have shown relatively low awareness of VPTAS. Many people told us that they did not hear about the VPTAS until after they had already made several trips for treatment.¹¹ People who have accessed VPTAS have consistently told us that the subsidies were not making much of a dent in their travel costs and were unrealistic in light of how much petrol and accommodation actually cost.¹²

Victorians in regional and rural areas experience financial disparity when diagnosed with cancer. The hidden costs associated with parking, travel and accommodation for cancer treatment is a burden felt particularly by these patients and impacts on psychosocial and financial wellbeing. VPTAS is lagging behind similar schemes in other jurisdictions and is failing to adequately compensate those in need, meaning Victorians pay more to access treatment than many interstate peers. Patients may defer treatment or seek alternative treatment options partially due to the financial burden of travel and accommodation costs¹³.

Cancer Council Victoria community consultation, July 2019

“Living in rural Victoria and working in Regional Victoria, transport is a major issue for patients as well as out of pocket expenses.”

Regional-based cancer survivor, Online survey, July 2019

“Transport is very limited. Very costly staying near to hospitalised patient.”

Regional-based carer, Online survey, July 2019

“I have all my care and treatment in Melbourne. This incurs enormous cost for travel and accommodation.”

Regional-based cancer survivor, Online survey, July 2019

The expansion of the free tram network would be of great benefit to those regional Victorians travelling to metropolitan Melbourne for treatment. Victorians patients and carers who are eligible for travel support can receive reimbursements for travel on one day. In addition, the one-way single ticket V/Line long-distance train or coach with a paper ticket includes one hour of free travel either side of your V/Line journey. If the patient is receiving treatment as an outpatient and required to stay overnight or multiple nights (which is often required for cancer treatment) in accommodation, the trips from the accommodation to the hospital are not eligible for reimbursement. In addition, there is a minimum six to eight-week wait for the VPTAS office to process claims, with waits of 12 weeks reported.

The current bushfire crisis also highlights the need for a more flexible and responsive VPTAS. We have spoken to oncology health professionals in Bairnsdale who have described the impact of evacuations and road closures in the region. This includes a small number of patients who have had to travel further and longer for treatment. Capacity to temporarily relax VPTAS for affected patients during unexpected events such as bushfires would alleviate financial distress.

We share Lynne's experience in the case study below. The burden of travel costs for regional patients, like Lynne, could be solved through expanding the criteria of the VPTAS.

We ask the Victorian Government to conduct reviews of VPTAS every two years in partnership with the VPTAS Alliance to identify and deal with current inequities.

Case study: “Help ease the burden”: Lynne

Lynne lives in Benalla with her partner. She has thyroid cancer, which has metastasised to her bones and lungs.

“We’re both in our 70s and we have to factor all this into our pension. We have to be very budget conscious, but we manage.”

She was already under the care of cardiologists at St Vincent’s and so chose to have her cancer treated there too.

“I don’t have access in town to the specialist services so if I chose to have the cancer dealt with locally it would almost certainly have to be either Wangaratta (32kms) or the cancer centre up in Albury (118kms) and either one of those to me would be more difficult than going to Melbourne to see the people I’m used to.”

Lynne and her partner take the train and then a tram, which takes about four hours door to door.

“I see five different specialists at St Vincent’s and because they all want to see me more than once a year, it gets quite involved with travel and accommodation. Train fares are normally somewhere around \$85 return for the two of us and then we can be looking at \$200–260 a night and often that’s two or three nights in a row. So, over the course of the year it’s several thousand dollars, it’s not just a few hundred.”

Four years into her cancer treatment, Lynne still hasn’t been advised about VPTAS.

“It would help to ease the burden if there could be some system available for (especially, but not exclusively) accommodation support.”

Recommendations

Cancer Council Victoria makes the following recommendations to address current public transport system inadequacies for cancer patients, their families and carers:

Recommendation 1: Expand Melbourne's Free Tram Zone

Cancer Council Victoria fully supports expanding the free tram zones to major public hospitals in Victoria. We recommend consulting with these hospitals in all stages of planning and implementation.

Recommendation 2: Fare reductions for concession card holders

Cancer Council Victoria fully supports the removal of fares for travel on Melbourne public transport for Seniors Card holders. Additionally, we recommend further fare reduction for all patients on concession cards on top of the current concession rate

Recommendation 3: Adopt new technologies to improve accessibility

Cancer Council Victoria supports the implementation of new technologies that enable alternative forms of payment rather than a reliance on a Myki card.

Recommendation 4: Review the Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme

We ask the Victorian Government to conduct reviews of VPTAS every two years in partnership with the VPTAS Alliance to address current inequities and to expand the eligibility criteria to include patients enrolling and participating in clinical trials.

Summary

Cancer is a growing burden for Victoria. Small changes to the transport system can make a large impact in expanding support for the many Victorians travelling to cancer treatment.

Our recent consultations with more than 600 Victorians identified a lack of support for transport and parking at cancer treatment centres.

Cancer Council Victoria invites the Inquiry into Expanding Melbourne's Free Tram Zone to consider our recommendations as vital to improving access to cancer treatment and care in metropolitan Melbourne.

With so many Victorians affected by cancer, ensuring access to cancer treatment and care is imperative to their survival and health outcomes.

[REDACTED]

Thank you for your consideration of this submission.

[REDACTED]

Todd Harper

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Notes

¹ Samina T. Syed, Ben S. Gerber, and Lisa K. Shar, “Traveling towards Disease: Transportation Barriers to Health Care Access,” *Journal of Community Health* 38, no. 5 (October 2013): 976–93, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10900-013-9681-1>.

² Victorian Cancer Registry, *Cancer in Victoria: Statistics and Trends 2018* (Melbourne: Cancer Council Victoria, 2019).

³ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2019, Australian Demographic Statistics, Cat. no. 3101.0, <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/mf/3101.0>, “Greater Melbourne (GCCSA),” Data by region, accessed January 28, 2020, <https://itt.abs.gov.au/itt/r.jsp?databyregion#/>.

⁴ For the purposes of this submission, we will use “community” to reflect the voice of patients and other people affected by cancer.

⁵ Consumers Health Forum of Australia, *Out of Pocket Pain*, Research report (Canberra: author, 2018), https://chf.org.au/sites/default/files/20180404_oop_report.pdf.

⁶ Diabetes Victoria, personal correspondence, January 8, 2020.

⁷ Cancer Council Victoria, *Informing the next Victorian Cancer Plan* (Melbourne: Cancer Council Victoria, 2019).

⁸ “Parkville Station,” Metro Tunnel, accessed December 18, 2019, <https://metrotunnel.vic.gov.au/construction/parkville/parkville-station>.

⁹ Victorian Cancer Registry, *Cancer in Victoria*.

¹⁰ “Victorian Patient Transport Assistance Scheme (VPTAS),” health.vic, Department of Health and Human Services (Victoria), accessed December 18, 2019, <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/hospitals-and-health-services/rural-health/vptas-how-to-apply>.

¹¹ Deborah Lawson and Sondra Davoren, *Making the Law Work Better for People Affected by Cancer: 2013 Report* (Melbourne: McCabe Centre for Law & Cancer, 2014), https://www.mccabecentre.org/downloads/focus_areas/treatment_support/Making_the_law_work_better.pdf.

¹² Lawson and Davoren, *Making the Law Work Better*.

¹³ Consumers Health Forum of Australia, *Out of Pocket Pain*.