

Exploring Cancer's Impact on Younger Patients



Mike Lang

By Sharon Basaraba
Senior Advisor, Scientific Communications & Engagement
Cancer Research & Analytics

Twelve years ago, Mike Lang's dream life was just getting started. Newly married, he was working toward becoming a full-time ski patroller at Whistler Mountain in BC and an adventure guide with teens in the summer. Young and fit, a cancer diagnosis was not on his radar.

"Life had suddenly hit a very big road bump," he recalls. "I'd lost the job I always wanted. We had to leave our friends on the coast and move back into my parents' basement since we had no savings to support us."

Mike's story is very familiar to epidemiologist Dr. Miranda Fidler-Benaoudia. As leader of the Alberta Adolescent and Young Adult (AYA) Cancer Survivor Study, she's following almost 25,000 young cancer survivors diagnosed between the ages of 15-39, to assess their long-term healthcare needs and outcomes.



Dr. Miranda Fidler-Benaoudia

“Cancer is traumatic at any age,” she notes. “But young people are going through key developmental stages. These are relationship years – with friends and partners – and they’re establishing themselves professionally without having developed the coping skills we have later in life. That’s why we see they tend to get less education, have more financial challenges, and a greater burden of health issues later on.”

Cancers diagnosed before the age of 40 are far outweighed by those among older people. Fidler-Benaoudia says that’s meant younger cancer patients are under-researched and therefore not well understood.

“Someone who’s diagnosed in their twenties, could have another sixty years ahead of them. By studying this younger group, we can learn their unique challenges, and tease out the misconceptions about cancer. So many young people didn’t see it coming. We don’t want them to be scared of it, just to be aware that cancer affects all age groups.”

The good news, she says, is that broader screening programs and a drop in smoking have led to reduced cervical and lung cancer rates in younger adults. Less reassuring is the trend towards increased colon, rectal, kidney and breast cancers among patients under 40, over the last 30 years.

“Although we don’t have a good understanding of what causes cancers in young people, these are cancers generally associated with obesity, so it’s possible that the increases observed are linked to lower physical activity levels or dietary changes among young people.”

Dr. Laura Labelle, operational lead for Cancer Care Alberta’s AYA Program in the south of the province, applauds this population-based research among patients diagnosed at a younger age.

“Younger patients with cancer often feel isolated and alone as they cope with their illness and treatment. They commonly need more, or different kinds of information and support, to navigate their cancer treatment and the health care system relative to older patients. New large-scale research studies like Dr. Fidler-Benaoudia’s project will help us tailor our education, supportive services, and care pathways to the unique needs of AYA patients, in order to improve their experiences and outcomes.”

Now a health researcher himself, and a father of two young children, Mike Lang is happy that his cancer history is part of the huge database Fidler-Benaoudia is studying.

“Her research is powerful because the group is so large and comprehensive. Thanks to more awareness about emotional aspects like depression and anxiety among young cancer patients, I know that the system can offer more support for people like me through diagnosis, treatment, and beyond.”