

Specialists urge action on treatments for liver cancer

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The Gastroenterological Society of Australia (GESA) has urged government to prioritise liver cancer, including the funding of new immunotherapies.

“Rates of liver cancer have doubled in the past 20 years, yet it remains an under-recognised, under-diagnosed and under-treated cancer. We need timely subsidisation of new treatments and Government investment in measures to aid early diagnosis and intervention,” said Professor Darrell Crawford, head of the School of Clinical Medicine at The University of Queensland and research director at the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation.

Liver cancer is the fastest growing cause of cancer death in Australia, with a five-year survival rate of less than 20 per cent, which is why experts are hopeful the availability of immunotherapies like checkpoint inhibitors will provide a much needed new line of defence.

“The liver is a complex organ which plays a central role in every metabolic function of the body,” said Professor Crawford.

“More than 90 per cent of people with liver cancer have background, underlying liver disease, and around 70 per cent have been infected with viral hepatitis. It’s important that liver specialists work in sync with radiologists, oncologists and cancer nurses to guide treatment decisions and optimise outcomes.

“We are on the cusp of a new era in the way liver cancer is treated, which is wonderful news for patients and doctors. However, liver specialists must ensure cancer treatment – including with checkpoint inhibitors – includes broader plans to manage liver health.”

A workshop on hepatocellular carcinoma, the most common form of liver cancer, is being held at the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation in Brisbane later this week. It will include a focus on the need for and role of new liver cancer treatments.

Professor Crawford stressed early diagnosis of liver cancer is essential. “The key is routine six monthly liver ultrasounds for people with or at risk of liver disease and improved screening among the at-risk population.

“Liver cancer is a clear and present threat and the time to act is now. Liver specialists must ensure they are ready for new treatments, and the Government must be prepared to provide the funding and support necessary to turn the tide on live cancer,” added Professor Crawford.