Cancer Society

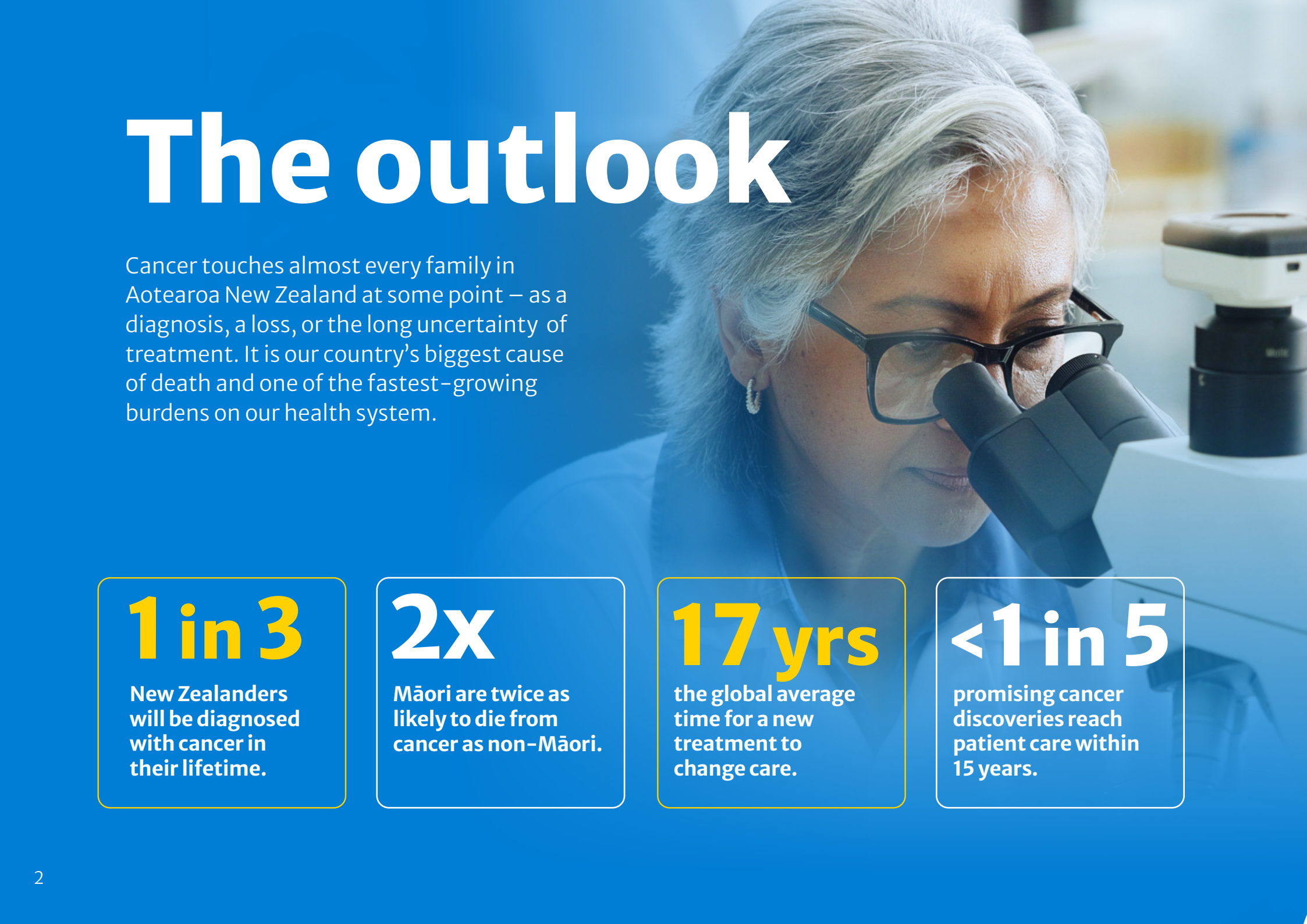
Te Kāhui Matepukupuku o Aotearoa

Research transforms what's possible

Research and Innovation Strategy 2026 – 2031

The outlook

Cancer touches almost every family in Aotearoa New Zealand at some point – as a diagnosis, a loss, or the long uncertainty of treatment. It is our country's biggest cause of death and one of the fastest-growing burdens on our health system.



1 in 3

New Zealanders will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime.

2x

Māori are twice as likely to die from cancer as non-Māori.

17 yrs

the global average time for a new treatment to change care.

<1 in 5

promising cancer discoveries reach patient care within 15 years.

Cancer research operates within a rapidly changing environment.

Aotearoa New Zealand has persistent inequities in health outcomes.

The research and not for profit landscape is highly fragmented with pockets of excellence but limited connectivity.

The cancer outlook

81 people
diagnosed every day

10,500
deaths each year

Without action, new diagnoses are projected to rise from over 30,000 in 2025 to more than **45,000** by 2044.

Research making impact

Cancer Society New Zealand funds a wide range of researchers working to reduce the impact of cancer for people across Aotearoa New Zealand. These case studies offer a snapshot of this work – but they are only part of a much bigger story.

You can read more about the research we invest in at: **cancer.org.nz/research**

Clinical trials triples recovery rates and changes practice

It's not every day that a clinical trial reshapes global cancer care – but the BM12 CAST trial is doing just that. Through a national research grant to **Dr Travis Perera,** the Cancer Society supported Wellington Hospital to take part in this Australasian clinical trial, led by the Australasian Leukaemia & Lymphoma Group across eight hospital sites in Australia and New Zealand. The trial tested whether a different combination of existing medicines could better prevent graft versus host disease, a serious complication after blood stem cell transplant, in people with high-risk blood cancers.

The results showed the new approach tripled the chance of a person being alive, healthy and free of graft versus host disease three years after transplant, compared with the long-standing standard of care. Because the trial repurposed already funded medicines, its findings have immediate real-world relevance and are already helping clinicians provide better, safer care for cancer patients.

Finding tiny cancer signals in the bloodstream

Earlier cancer detection can make a critical difference to treatment options and outcomes. **Dr Judy Ann Cocadiz's** post-doctoral fellowship is supporting the development of a small, temporary device designed to capture circulating tumour DNA, or ctDNA, directly from the bloodstream. These tiny fragments of genetic material are released by cancer cells and can provide important clues about whether cancer is present, how it is changing, or whether it has returned after treatment.

Current approaches rely on blood samples, which may contain only very small amounts of ctDNA. By improving how this material is collected, the research could help make cancer testing more sensitive, less invasive, and more useful for ongoing monitoring. If successful, this technology could contribute to earlier diagnosis, more accurate follow-up after treatment, and better-informed care for people affected by cancer in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Understand the power and potential of Natural Killer cells

Ariana Drabble's PhD research brings together cutting-edge cancer immunotherapy and a deeply personal commitment to whānau. Her work focuses on strengthening treatments for blood cancers by combining CAR T cells with CAR-engineered natural killer, or NK, cells. CAR T cell therapies can train the immune system to recognise and destroy cancer cells, but some cancers learn to hide or suppress the immune response.

NK cells have their own powerful cancer-killing abilities and may help guide, support, and protect T cells so treatment is stronger and longer lasting. By testing these combined immune-cell approaches in laboratory and animal models, Ariana's research aims to build the evidence needed for more effective therapies with fewer relapses and side effects. Grounded in whakapapa and the experiences of loved ones affected by cancer, this mahi has the potential to benefit future generations.

AI-powered insights for more personalised cancer care

Dr Arthur Morley-Bunker's research is exploring how digital pathology and artificial intelligence could help improve the way colorectal cancer is diagnosed and understood. By using AI to analyse cancer tissue, the project aims to identify tumour features that may not be easily seen by the human eye. The research will also look at how tissue features can be combined with genomic information to support more accurate diagnosis and prognosis for individual patients.

In a New Zealand cohort of colorectal cancer patients, the team plans to develop a new AI-based digital pathology approach to detect a genomic biomarker linked to genetic predisposition to colorectal cancer and potential response to immunotherapy. If successful, this work could help strengthen pathology services in New Zealand and provide a foundation for applying digital pathology and AI methods to other cancers.

The challenge

We believe research changes what's possible. Every breakthrough in cancer care began with a question someone had the courage to ask. Research is how we save lives, improve quality of life, prevent cancer, detect it earlier and bring tomorrow's treatments closer to home.

But research only changes lives when it reaches people. Right now, in Aotearoa New Zealand, the response is not fit for purpose for what we are experiencing, let alone for the avalanche of diagnosis that is heading our way.

Breakthroughs – including the ones made here in Aotearoa do not automatically become better care for people. To achieve this, we need a research system capable of asking the questions that matter most to our population, generating the evidence clinicians can act on, and ensuring new knowledge reaches the communities who need it most.

Remarkable work is happening across New Zealand. But right now, the system is fragmented. The challenge is not a lack of expertise or commitment, but the absence of infrastructure, coordination, connections and investment needed to consistently translate research into better care and widespread impact.

Services outside the main centres often want to offer their patients clinical trials but can't, because they don't have the trained staff and support to run them.

People and whānau impacted by cancer are only occasionally in the room when research priorities are set. As a result, the full potential of New Zealand's research talent and investment is not being realised – and the people bearing the greatest cost of that are those who are already most underserved.

Tackling this challenge will take all of us working together over the long term – government, researchers, universities, health services, communities and organisations like ours. It is part of our wider ambition: **a future free from cancer.**

This Strategy sets out where the Cancer Society can make the greatest contribution – bringing people together, investing in what matters most, and helping ensure research delivers better outcomes for everyone affected by cancer.

Why research matters

In 2024, the Cancer Society brought its research strategies, expertise and investment together into one national function. This reflects our commitment to working more effectively, investing more strategically, and delivering greater impact for people affected by cancer.

We know we cannot achieve this alone.

Progress depends on strong partnerships with researchers, clinicians, universities, iwi, communities, government, supporters and people impacted by cancer. Together, we can build a cancer research and innovation ecosystem that is connected, equitable and focused on improving outcomes for every person and whānau affected by cancer.

Whether you're a researcher, clinician, funder, partner, advocate or a person or whānau member impacted by cancer, you have a role to play. Join us in working together, to build a stronger research system and create a future free from cancer.

"Research is one of the most powerful investments we can make for future generations.

It gives us hope that fewer New Zealanders will hear the words 'you have cancer' and more families will experience better outcomes."

Julian Grennell
(Ngāi Tahu)
Chair

In their own words, our leaders explain why research matters.

"Research underpins everything we do. It shapes how we prevent cancer, influences the policies we advocate for, strengthens the support we provide families, and helps ensure every investment we make delivers greater impact for those affected by cancer."

Nicola Coom
Chief Executive

"Research transforms care. It gives clinicians the evidence to diagnose earlier, treat more effectively, improve quality of life and deliver the best possible outcomes for patients and whānau."

Dr Kate Gregory
Medical Director

"Research transforms lives when patient and whānau voice shapes it. Equity begins with asking the right questions, guided by those who carry cancer's greatest burden yet have historically been excluded."

Pania Coote
(Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Kauwhata, Ngāti Raukawa)
Mana Whakahaere

Working towards our vision

Our vision is a future free from cancer.

Research is one of the most powerful ways we can accelerate progress towards that future. It transforms lives by preventing cancer, detecting it earlier, improving treatments and helping people live better after a diagnosis.

By placing patients and whānau at the centre of research, we can ensure innovation focuses on the questions that matter most and delivers benefits where they are needed most.

Achieving this means closing the gap between discovery and everyday care. Too often, research findings take years to reach patients, and access to innovation depends on where people live rather than what they need. Changing that requires more than excellent research – it requires a connected system capable of translating discovery into better care.

Imagine a connected national network where universities, hospitals, community providers, researchers, iwi, not-for-profit organisations and people and whānau impacted by cancer work together towards a shared purpose.

A system where research informs care, care informs research, and knowledge moves quickly across the country so that every breakthrough can benefit every New Zealander.

It is a way of working. A nationally connected ecosystem that links expertise, strengthens collaboration, shares infrastructure, expands access to clinical trials and supercharges the translation of research into practice so everyone benefits. Countries that have adopted this approach are seeing more people participate in research, faster implementation of innovation, and better outcomes for patients.

The Cancer Society's role is to help create the conditions that allow this network to grow. As an independent philanthropic organisation, we can invest where others cannot, convene partners across the research and health sectors, champion the voice of patients and whānau, and advocate for the long-term investment needed to sustain change.

This is a bold ambition. It will take time. This Strategy sets out the Cancer Society's contribution over the next five years, beginning with the area where we believe we can have the greatest impact: clinical trials.

The big dream

We will build a national comprehensive cancer network, so wherever you live in New Zealand, you have access to the best cancer care and the latest research.

Strategic priority **1**

Clinical trials:

Our greatest opportunity to improve outcomes

Clinical trials are one of the fastest ways to improve cancer outcomes. They give people access to promising new treatments and life extending care before they become widely available; they improve standards of care and generate evidence that shapes better treatment for future generations. Yet in Aotearoa New Zealand, access to clinical trials is not equal, it depends heavily on where you live.

Most trials take place in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. If you live outside our three biggest cities, your chances of being able to participate are significantly lower. Māori and Pacific peoples face additional geographic, systemic and cultural barriers. This is not a minor inconvenience: it means people with cancer may miss out on care that could make a real difference, and it means the research produced does not represent the full diversity of our country's population.

This is a two-tier system. We are determined to change it.

Imagine a future where every New Zealander diagnosed with cancer has the opportunity to participate in a clinical trial, regardless of where they live.

New Zealand is not alone in recognising this challenge. Around the world, countries are investing in stronger clinical trial networks because they know they improve access to innovation, strengthen research and deliver better patient outcomes.

Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora is part of this global movement, and New Zealand's own evidence points to the same conclusion: we need a more connected, better-supported clinical trial system.

We could have spread our investment across many priorities, but that risks diluting our impact. The evidence, both in New Zealand and internationally, consistently points to clinical trials as one of the most effective ways to improve cancer outcomes, reduce inequities and strengthen the research system.

More sites. More trials. Greater access. Made possible by a deliberate focus.

WHAT WE ARE DOING:

- **Partnering with Health New Zealand – Te Whatu Ora to develop a clinical trials site maturation framework – a practical tool to help hospitals and health services across the country build and grow their capacity to run clinical trials**
- **Supporting multi-site investigator-initiated trials so that studies can run across more locations, including regional centres**
- **Bringing together discovery researchers and clinical researchers to support activities that integrate research into care along the bench-to-bedside pathway**

We're not simply funding research. We're investing in the infrastructure, capability and partnerships that make research possible.

Imagine a future where every person diagnosed with cancer in Aotearoa New Zealand can easily discover, understand and access the clinical trial that is right for them – regardless of where they live.

That is the ambition behind a national Cancer Trial Platform: connecting patients, clinicians and researchers through technology so innovation reaches more people, more quickly.

Strategic priority **2**

Strengthening the workforce

Backing the people behind the breakthroughs

"What has kept me in cancer research is listening to the stories of women in my community and being even a small part of that journey. The work can be challenging, especially when it's grounded in your own iwi and community, because there's a real personal pressure to do it well. But that's also why it matters – I am passionate about helping create more equitable health outcomes, especially for Māori communities"

Dr Helena Abolins-Thompson, University of Otago (Wellington), Māori Cancer Researcher Award recipient 2021

70%

of Cancer Society funded research grants led to at least one new researcher qualification.

95%

of researchers said researchers said Cancer Society funding was essential or very important to their research.

Based on Cancer Society New Zealand funded grants 2012 – 2024.

THE PROBLEM:

Aotearoa New Zealand has exceptional cancer researchers. But too many face uncertain career pathways. At the critical transition between training and establishing an independent research career, opportunities are limited and funding is difficult to come by.

As a result, talented researchers leave the field – or leave New Zealand altogether. When that happens, we lose expertise, momentum and the discoveries that could improve outcomes for future generations.

Māori researchers are significantly under-represented in the cancer research workforce. This is both an equity issue and a system challenge. Research is most effective when it reflects the needs, values and experiences of the communities it is intended to serve. Strengthening the Māori research workforce supports more responsive, culturally grounded approaches, and helps ensure research is shaped with, and by, Māori for Māori communities.

> **New Zealand has world-class researchers. Let's give them every reason to start here, build their careers here and come home.**

WHAT WE ARE DOING:

- **Expanding the Māori Cancer Researcher Awards – our flagship partnership with Hei Āhuru Mōwai Māori Cancer Leadership Aotearoa – to grow and retain Māori cancer research leadership**
- **Supporting early-career researchers during the critical transition from training to independent research careers**
- **Investing in professional development so clinical researchers can lead more research across the country**
- **Building tomorrow's workforce by supporting medical and allied health students to engage in research early in their careers**

Cancer research is ultimately about people. Every breakthrough depends on curious minds, dedicated clinicians and researchers who choose to devote their careers to improving the lives of others.

Investing in people is one of the most enduring investments we can make because today's emerging researchers will become tomorrow's research leaders, mentors and innovators.

Strategic priority **3**

Research must be equitable and community-led

Cancer does not affect everyone equally. The inequities we see in cancer outcomes are not inevitable, and they will not disappear without deliberate action. They reflect differences in access to prevention, diagnosis, treatment, research participation, and the opportunities people have to benefit from innovation. To improve outcomes for everyone, research must be designed with the communities it seeks to serve.

This strategy prioritises Māori, Pacific peoples and people living in rural and regional communities because these populations continue to experience poorer cancer outcomes and face significant barriers to care and participation in research. For Māori, this means recognising Māori not only as a priority population, but as partners with shared decision-making authority who help shape research priorities, governance and programme design in accordance with Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

People and whānau impacted by cancer also have a vital role to play. They bring perspectives that no dataset or clinical guideline can provide. Their experiences help ensure research asks the right questions, focuses on what matters most to patients and whānau, and produces findings that are meaningful, relevant and trusted. While people and whānau impacted by cancer are increasingly involved in research, this is not yet consistent across the sector. We believe they should be genuine partners throughout the research process – from identifying priorities and designing studies through to interpreting results and sharing findings.

> **"I can't change the fact that I had cancer, but I can help change what the experience looks like for the next person. That's why lived experience belongs at the heart of cancer research."**

Jodie Collins, Bowel Cancer Survivor and Researcher

WHAT WE ARE DOING:

- **Supporting people and whānau impacted by cancer to partner with researchers throughout the design, delivery and translation of research where there is likely to be real benefit**
- **Embedding whānau-centred approaches into the design and delivery of cancer research**
- **Developing a national lived experience platform that connects researchers with people affected by cancer, supported by training and resources that enable genuine and productive partnerships**
- **Increasing public awareness of the importance of cancer research and clinical trials, and the role that people affected by cancer can play in shaping future discoveries**

Equity is not a separate workstream – it is how we will measure success. Because research only fulfils its promise when every person, every whānau and every community can benefit from it.

New Zealand needs research for New Zealanders

Every breakthrough in health begins with a question that matters to patients and communities.

International research advances are extraordinary and essential. But they are largely generated in health systems, populations and environments that are different from our own. New Zealand's population, geography, health system and Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments mean we need strong local research capability – not to replace global science, but to ensure it is translated, adapted and applied in ways that improve outcomes here in Aotearoa New Zealand.

No one else will answer New Zealand's questions for us. If we want better outcomes for Māori, Pacific peoples, rural communities and future generations of New Zealanders, we must build the capability to ask – and answer – those questions ourselves, because no one else will.

Building that capability requires more than funding individual research projects. It requires sustained investment in people, partnerships, clinical trial infrastructure, data, technology and the research workforce.

It also means ensuring people and whānau impacted by cancer help shape the questions we ask and the solutions we pursue.

Our approach is built on a simple conviction: we need both international advances and strong local research to deliver better outcomes for people in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The world will continue to make extraordinary discoveries. So will we. Our responsibility is to ensure that combined, these discoveries translate into better outcomes for every person affected by cancer in Aotearoa New Zealand.

What the Cancer Society brings

The Cancer Society is New Zealand's leading non-government organisation dedicated to reducing the incidence and impact of cancer. Through prevention, early detection, patient and whānau support, research and advocacy, we work alongside communities across Aotearoa New Zealand to improve outcomes today while helping shape a future free from cancer.

As an independent charitable organisation, we are uniquely positioned to bring together people, organisations and ideas across the cancer system. We invest, convene partners, amplify the voices of people affected by cancer, and advocate for the changes needed to improve outcomes for future generations.

Within research and innovation, we see our role evolving in three complementary ways.

A strategic investor and shaper

We will invest strategically in the areas that have the greatest potential to improve outcomes and create a future free from cancer. Working alongside researchers, clinicians, government and sector partners, we will help shape national research priorities and strengthen the connections between research, policy and practice.

A trusted connector and catalyst

No single organisation can transform cancer outcomes alone. We will use our independence and trusted relationships to bring together researchers, clinicians, universities, government, iwi, community organisations and funders around shared goals. Sometimes we will lead. Sometimes we will support others to lead. Our role is to accelerate collaboration, reduce fragmentation and help create a more connected research ecosystem.

A champion of lived experience

As New Zealand's largest cancer consumer organisation, we have the privilege of hearing the experiences of thousands of people affected by cancer every year. We will ensure those voices help shape research priorities, programme design and innovation so that research focuses on what matters most to patients, whānau and communities.

These roles are complementary. By investing strategically, connecting the right people, and ensuring lived experience remains at the centre of decision-making, we believe the Cancer Society can help accelerate a more connected, equitable and impactful cancer research system for Aotearoa New Zealand.

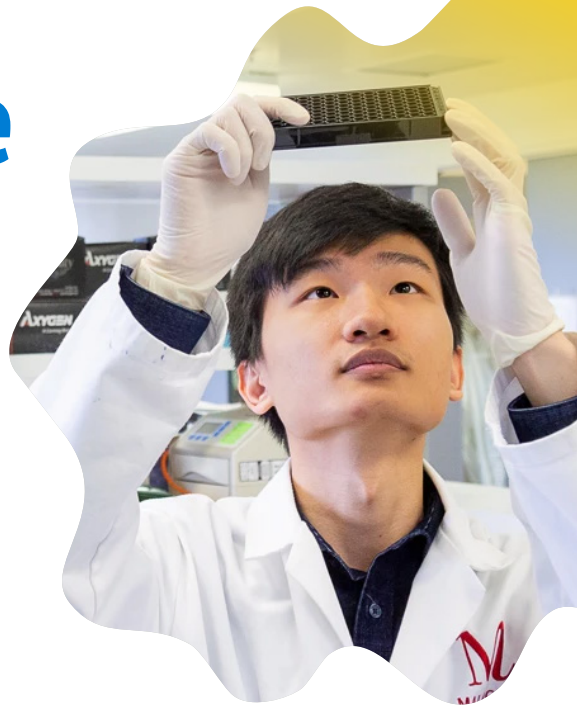
Hei Āhuru Mōwai Māori Cancer Leadership Aotearoa / WICC 2026

What success looks like

We won't measure success by the amount of research we fund. We'll measure it by the difference that research makes for people affected by cancer.

Success means:

- Every New Zealander diagnosed with cancer can participate in a clinical trial, regardless of where they live.
- People and whānau impacted by cancer are recognised as genuine partners in research, helping shape the questions we ask, the studies we undertake and the way discoveries are translated into care.
- A stronger, more sustainable cancer research workforce, with more researchers building long-term careers here and more early-career researchers progressing into independent research leadership.
- A growing Māori cancer research workforce, ensuring research is increasingly designed with, by and for Māori communities.
- A more connected cancer research system, where researchers, clinicians, universities, health services, iwi, government, not-for-profit organisations and communities work together towards shared national priorities.
- Research that demonstrates its impact, with clear evidence of how discoveries are improving prevention, diagnosis, treatment, survivorship and equity for people affected by cancer.



These are the foundations of the National Comprehensive Cancer Network we are working towards.

Not the finished network, but the conditions that allow it to grow – connecting people, strengthening capability and ensuring research reaches the people who need it most.

Cancer Society

Te Kāhui Matepukupuku o Aotearoa

More breakthroughs.
More lives saved.
More precious moments shared.

Working together towards a future free from cancer

Te mahi tahi mō te anamata mate pukupuku kore

www.cancer.org.nz | 0800 CANCER