

# Employment and financial challenges faced by adolescent and young adult (AYA) cancer survivors: A qualitative study



Chia Jie Tan<sup>1</sup>, Yu Ke<sup>1</sup>, Tabitha Ng<sup>1</sup>, Isabel Mei Jun Tan<sup>1</sup>, Goh Wei Lin<sup>2</sup>, Eileen Poon<sup>2</sup>, Mohamad Farid<sup>2</sup>, B Srilatha<sup>3</sup>, Alexandre Chan<sup>1,4,5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Pharmacy, National University of Singapore

<sup>2</sup> Division of Medical Oncology, National Cancer Centre Singapore

<sup>3</sup> Singapore Cancer Society, Singapore

<sup>4</sup> Department of Pharmacy, National Cancer Centre Singapore

<sup>5</sup> Duke-NUS Medical School Singapore, Singapore



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# Conflict of interest disclosure

Chia Jie Tan, B Pharm (Hons), BCOP

Has no real or apparent  
conflicts of interest to report.



# Introduction

- Cancer is a life-disrupting experience for AYA cancer patients (16 to 39 years old)
- Critical juncture in life with multiple milestones, including:
  - Completing education
  - Embarking on a career
  - Starting a family



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# Aims

- To evaluate the impact of employment and financial challenges on cancer survivorship among AYAs
- Include both AYA cancer survivors and healthcare professionals caring for AYA patients



# Methods: Study design

- Qualitative study employing focus group discussions
- Recruitment between July 2017 and October 2018
- Ethics approval obtained from SingHealth CIRB
- Written informed consent sought from all participants



# Methods: Study population

## AYA survivors

### Inclusion criteria

- Diagnosed between 16 and 39 years
- In disease remission for 6 months to 4 years
- Singaporean citizen or permanent resident

### Exclusion criteria

- Severe comorbidities

## Healthcare professionals

### Inclusion criteria

- Involved in the care of AYA cancer patients



# Methods: Focus group sessions

- Number of focus groups: 8 (AYA survivors), 3 (HCPs)
- 2 to 6 participants per group
- Facilitated by a research pharmacist
  - No professional relationship with participants
  - Not involved with recruitment
- Thematic content analysis using a deductive approach





# Results: Participant characteristics

- Recruited 23 AYA survivors
  - Majority (65.2%) were currently employed
  - Survivors from a range of malignancies, including lymphoma, sarcoma, germ cell tumor and breast cancer
- Recruited 18 HCPs
  - Physicians, nurses, medical social workers, allied health therapists and patient navigator
  - Most (61.1%) had more than 10 years of healthcare experience





# Results: Returning to work

- Concerns of inability to keep up with expectations
- Disclosure of cancer history when looking for jobs
- Counterexample: leveraging on experience with cancer as an advantage

*"My work is very, actually very stressful. I just worry that if I go back to my work, can I cope with the work, the daily load I used to have?"*

AYA #13  
(30 years old)



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# Results: Issues faced at work

- Residual complications from cancer and antineoplastic treatment
  - Cognitive impairment
  - Fatigue
- Restrictions imposed due to identity as cancer survivors
  - Taking on duties with less burden or more “regular hours”
  - Unable to pursue area of interest due to presence of “more first-hand germs”

*“[She] slowed down, [she] changed jobs, and then she didn’t know what to do, because [she] hated her job... she was a high-flyer... she wanted to just get going.”*

HCP #17  
(Psychologist)



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# Results: Complexity of work-related issues

- Work-related challenges among AYA cancer survivors are complex and multifaceted
- Varied nature of problems and attitude of survivors
- Return-to-work services must avoid one-size-fit-all approach
- Future research in this area should carefully consider outcomes



# Results: Misinformed perceptions

- Common perception: AYAs with history of cancer unable to return to previous work levels

## AYA Survivors

### Consequences:

- Lack of confidence in seeking/changing jobs

### Reality:

- With assistance?
- Experience leveraged upon as advantage

## Employers

### Consequences:

- Work restrictions imposed on survivors

### Reality:

- Restrictions unnecessary
- Career advancement may be impeded



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# Results: Access to insurance

- Insurance coverage during and after cancer treatment
- Adequate coverage alleviates financial burden during treatment
- Lack of access post treatment leads to insecurity
- Contrary to expectations, given local healthcare landscape

*"... when [the] doctor said 'you are diagnosed with cancer,' I quickly... quickly go and check..."*

AYA #2  
(39 years old)



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# Results: Information needs

- Unmet information need – echoes finding of previous study<sup>1</sup>
- Sources of information
- Key uncertainties: embargo period, coverage of previous cancers, impact on children



# Conclusion

- AYA survivors face difficulties at work and in obtaining insurance coverage
- Imperative to incorporate return-to-work programs and financial counselling in survivorship services





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