

Education and Career Support – year one review

Background

Young people with a cancer diagnosis often experience significant interruptions to their education and their career, and may also experience issues with reintegration, peer relationships and long term educational attainment and employmentⁱ.

Redkite has provided education assistance in the form of Education Grants and Scholarships since 1998, initially for costs associated with tutoring and education and career development activities. However, recognising the significant ongoing impact of a cancer diagnosis, Redkite conducted a review of educational and vocational service provision in the Australian cancer sector in 2012. This review resulted in the development of Redkite's Education and Career Support (ECS) program.

The ECS program

Redkite's ECS program is a strengths-based individualised support program, delivered by qualified professionals. The program provides support for young people (15–24):

- at any stage of their cancer diagnosis, during and/or beyond treatment,
- in hospital and/or the community, and
- at any stage of their education and career development.

The program was launched in January 2014 with four ECS Consultants providing support to young people across Australia.

Young people can contact their Consultant by phone or by email. They can meet face to face, one-on-one, or with other young people in a workshop setting. The frequency of contact and length of time in the program depends on the young person's need, and ranges significantly from one-off or intermittent contact to regular face-to-face contact.

Intended outcomes for young people are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. ECS program intended outcomes for young people

Immediate outcomes

- Clarity about future direction
- Hope for the future/empowerment/self-efficacy
- Maintain connections to work and education
- Feel supported
- Increased knowledge and awareness of opportunities
- Increased uptake of other relevant support or courses
- Increased skills in relevant areas

Intermediate outcomes

- Increased confidence
- Increased resilience and adaptability
- Increased sense of independence
- Making informed decisions about education and career

Long term outcomes

- Improved emotional wellbeing
- Maintained or increased participation and engagement with work and/or education

Review of the pilot program

The review, which was conducted in January and February 2015 sought to answer key evaluation questions:

1. How has the program been implemented and delivered?
2. To what extent is there engagement with the program?
3. How well is the program meeting the education and career needs of our clients?
4. What opportunities are there to increase the program's reach and efficiency?

The evaluation framework was developed following consultation with Redkite team members and examination of the ECS program documentation, including the program logic model and findings from the 2012 review. A mixed methods approach was used and the data collection included:

- an online survey of young people (46 respondents)
- semi-structured interviews with young people (10 participants), health professionals/referrers (8), ECS Consultants (3) and Redkite Managers (3).
- existing ECS sources (Redkite database, 232 young people from 997 case notes).

Review findings

1. Program implementation and delivery

Young people's experiences of the program varied significantly, reflecting the breadth of their support needs and the programs' flexibility in meeting those needs.

Consultants worked with young people:

- to provide a broad range of different types of support (for instance, liaising with schools and employers, work experience opportunities, career coaching)
- at various stages of the young person's education or career development
- at different stages of young people's treatment
- in various locations (in hospital and outside of hospital) using a combination of methods.

Although young people indicated that they like to use a variety of ways to connect with their Consultant, the review particularly highlighted the value of being able to meet face-to-face and being able to meet outside of the hospital. Both of these were seen as beneficial in establishing trust and rapport for ongoing support relationships:

"I found it relaxing being able to talk in a 'non hospital' or 'non office' environment"

Source: Young person, survey respondent

However, there were differences in levels of in-person face-to-face contact across states, highlighting a need to investigate consistency in program delivery nationally.

In addition to one-on-one support, consultants delivered support to groups of young people through workshops on topics such as developing resumes, LinkedIn profiles and networking skills. The review found that these have been well received by young people and health professionals, and that they provide an opportunity to use consultants' time more efficiently, increase service uptake, and create opportunities for young people to connect with one another:

"I went to a networking [workshop]. It was really good. I actually found that incredibly helpful and I've used a lot of the tips..."

Source: Young person, interviewee

2. Engagement with the program

232 young people had contact with an ECS Consultant in the program's first year, a higher level than anticipated. However, there were variations between states in the number of young people connecting to the program, and in how and where young people found out about the program.

The review also highlighted that more could be done to connect with:

- young people experiencing late effects from cancer treatment
- young people living outside of major cities.

3. Meeting needs

Of the survey respondents who received support from an ECS Consultant, a large majority (20 out of 23) reported that the support they received met all or most of their needs. Similarly, professionals referring to the program indicated that it is filling a significant gap in services available to young people:

"It's just a really great, great thing to be able to access for our young people because it really was a gap... If the program was taken away again it would be back to that big gap."

Source: External referrer

Survey findings demonstrated that for many young people, the program is contributing to improved emotional wellbeing:

- 88% reported knowing that Redkite is there for them if they need support with work or education
- 83% reported increased knowledge of opportunities available to them
- 75% reported increased clarity about their next steps
- 71% reported increased capacity to manage the impact that cancer may have on their work or education
- 71% felt more optimistic about the future

Source: Young person survey, n=24, 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses combined..

"It wasn't about focussing on the cancer or anything like that, it was about focussing on what would come and I found that a lot better."

Source: Young person, interviewee

There were also early indications that the program may be contributing to increased engagement in work or education for young people. Since connecting with a Consultant:

- 75% had decided on the next steps for their future
- 38% had returned to school or work or TAFE/college/uni
- 33% had signed up for or taken a course, and
- 21% had started work experience or volunteering

Source: Young person survey, n=24, 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses combined..

"My consultant not only helped me get started but gave me the confidence to become an independent person again which I thought I forgot how to do after my treatment."

Source: Young person, survey respondent

Conclusion

The findings of this review indicate a promising start for the ECS Program, with strong agreement by young people, health professionals and Consultants that the program is beneficial for young people. The program is filling what was a significant gap in education and career support services for young people with a cancer diagnosis.

The review findings have been used to develop and implement a Service Development Plan for 2015 – 2016. A full evaluation of the program is planned for 2016.

More information

For more information about this review, please contact the Redkite Research and Evaluation team by calling **1800 733 548** or emailing re@redkite.org.au



Redkite is a national charity providing essential support to children and young people with cancer (0-24 years) and their families and support networks.

1800 REDKITE (1800 733 548)
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Note: When referring to young people in this document, this implies that they are diagnosed with cancer or have experienced a cancer diagnosis and have moderate to severe late effects and are aged between 15-24 years.

ⁱ Pini, S., Hugh-Jones, S., Gardner, P.H. (2011). 'What effect does a cancer diagnosis have on the educational engagement and school life of teenagers? A systematic review.' *Psycho-oncology*, 21, 685-694.