

MEDIA RELEASE

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Federal Budget has left Head and Neck Cancer patients behind in providing access to critical survivorship care

The Federal Budget handed down on Tuesday 12 May has overlooked a critical gap in Head and Neck Cancer care, with no funding allocated for facial prosthetics.

The omission leaves more than 300 Australians without access to essential rehabilitation following life-saving cancer surgery to replace missing facial features - including eyes, ears, noses and cheeks – critical to restoring function and dignity.

For Ben Hale, a young South Australian living with Head and Neck Cancer, the lack of funding meant facial prosthetics were never a realistic option.

After losing his eye to cancer in his 40s, Ben was told prosthetic options were available - but with no clear funding pathway and prohibitive out-of-pocket costs, he made the difficult decision not to pursue it. His story is not unique.

‘It was easier not knowing,’ Ben said. ‘I knew I wouldn’t be able to pay for it anyway.’

Like many people treated for Head and Neck Cancer, Ben’s needs evolved over time. Following a cancer recurrence, additional surgery and radiation resulted in further visible facial changes, prompting him to reconsider facial prosthetic options – yet they continue to remain out of reach due to the cost.

Ben’s experience reflects a broader, systemic gap in Australia’s Head and Neck Cancer survivorship care. More than 5,500 Australians are diagnosed with a type of Head and Neck Cancer each year, and over 17,000 people diagnosed in the past five years are now living with long-term impacts of treatment. For many, this includes facial disfigurement that impacts on their mental health, communication, relationships, employment and participation in public life.

Despite this, Australia has no national program to fund external facial prosthetics that simulate missing facial features such as eyes, ears, noses and cheeks. Around 300 Australians

each year face prohibitive out-of-pocket costs for custom-made prostheses that are essential to daily function and wellbeing.

HANCA's pre-budget submission called for a nationally administered provider reimbursement scheme, underpinned by accreditation and training standards, with a modest \$25 million investment over four years. This would close critical gaps in Head and Neck Cancer care - restoring dignity, confidence, and quality of life for people facing profound facial disfigurement after life-saving cancer surgery.

While the Government continues to state its commitment to closing the gap and improving outcomes for people affected by Head and Neck Cancer, that commitment must extend beyond treatment- aligning with the Australian Cancer Plan's priority on equity to ensure all patients have access to the survivorship care they need.

'Survivorship care is cancer care, and we are simply calling for equitable treatment,' said HANCA CEO, Nadia Rosin, noting breast prostheses have been funded since 2008. 'We will not stop advocating until these nationally recognised gaps are addressed.'

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