

## A Word From the Movember Foundation on World Cancer Day

*Today is World Cancer Day and it is time men start taking their health seriously, says Owen Sharp.*

One of the lasting memories I have of being a student nurse in Glasgow in the early 90s comes from the time I spent on the cancer wards. Many of the patients I cared for there were tough, working class Glaswegian workers, who although they were scared out of their wits, were facing their own mortality with incredible stoicism and bravery.

Some had clearly never spoken to anyone about their health for a very long time. The real tragedy for these men was that things could have been very different—if only they had sought help earlier. Many still have the idea that it's not 'manly' to talk about their health problems, even when it comes to their cancer risk. And it's been estimated that 80 per cent of men won't go and see a doctor unless their partner convinces them to do so.

According to the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), the result is that men often aren't being diagnosed with serious or life-threatening illnesses until it's too late. Across the world, men die an average six years younger than women, and for reasons that are largely preventable.

It doesn't have to be this way. Prostate cancer – the most common non-skin cancer in the United States, affects 1 in 9 men with African-American men being 74% more likely to develop prostate cancer. If it is detected early, then the chance of surviving beyond five years is 99 percent. For men under 50, the number one cancer risk is testicular cancer. Again, if it is caught and treated early, the odds of survival are very high. But men will only notice something is not right if they are vigilant about regularly checking themselves.

If we're going to improve the length and quality of men's lives then we really need to start shifting these outdated attitudes and begin taking this issue seriously.

As cancer survival rates improve, there are also growing numbers of men living with the after effects of their cancer. Male cancers are particularly cruel because they strike at the very heart of what it means to be a man.

Prostate cancer treatment in the form of hormone therapy, surgery and radiotherapy, comes with major side effects such as urinary and bowel incontinence and sexual dysfunction. But perhaps because men tend to be stoical about their treatment – they suffer in silence and don't ask for help – they often get ignored. There is currently a massive gap between the best and worst support men receive, and this disparity can have a huge impact on his quality of life.

The Lancet Oncology published a study earlier this week, noting that more than four in five men—81 percent—with prostate cancer suffer from erectile dysfunction following treatment, yet over half fail to receive any medical advice or support. The research, funded by the Movember Foundation with Prostate Cancer UK, revealed that sexual problems are common in men diagnosed with prostate cancer, regardless of the stage of the disease, their treatment or their age. The report, called Life After Prostate Cancer Diagnosis (LAPCD), tracked over 30,000 men across the United Kingdom, and found that more than half of over 65s (61 percent) were not offered medical advice for erection problems, compared to a fifth of men under 55. While this is a regional study, the learnings have relevancy beyond the United Kingdom.

This is totally unacceptable. Sexual dysfunction can have a huge impact on quality of life after cancer treatment. Around 75 per cent of the men questioned in the LAPCD study said it was a 'significant issue' for them. It can lead to anxiety and depression and contribute to the breakdown of relationships. Yet men are often made to feel that they should be grateful to be alive, regardless of the ongoing effects of their treatment. Only this week, a 70-year-old prostate cancer survivor who had approached his GP for advice on sexual problems, told me that his doctor's reply was: "Well, what do you expect? You're on hormone therapy." It isn't right that any man – whatever his age - should be faced with that kind of brutal and unsympathetic response.

Back in the United States, in a bid to tackle the problem, the Movember Foundation has launched online programs through its [TrueNTH Prostate Cancer](#) and [TrueNTH Testicular Cancer](#) initiatives. It provides personalized strategies to help men and improve their sexual well-being during and after cancer treatment. We hope it will go some way towards plugging the gap and providing better support for men struggling after cancer. But we also want men to have the confidence to speak honestly and without embarrassment about their side effects. There's nothing 'manly' about ignoring symptoms but there is courage in taking action. We're asking men get to know what's normal for their bodies and go to the doctor when something isn't right. Suffering in silence is never the answer.

#### **About Owen Sharp and the Movember Foundation**

Owen Sharp is chief executive of the Movember Foundation.

The Movember Foundation has one goal: to stop men dying too young. As the only global charity tackling men's health issues year-round, the foundation supports the following causes: prostate cancer, testicular cancer, mental health, and suicide prevention. Since 2003, the support of more than 5 million men and women has funded over 1,200 innovative projects across more than 20 countries including [TrueNTH Testicular Cancer](#), [TrueNth Prostate Cancer](#) and Making Connections. Most recently, Movember launched the [50 Million Men](#) initiative, which seeks to improve the health of 50 million American men over the next 5 years. To learn more, please visit [movember.com](http://movember.com). Movember is a registered 501(c)(3) charity.