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Improving access to exercise services after a cancer diagnosis: patient and health professional perspectives

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Background:

Exercise is a critical component of best practice cancer survivorship care, but availability and uptake of services is highly variable. Group exercise may be an effective and affordable service option for many patients but is not routinely accessible. The primary objective was to capture and evaluate the experiences of people living with and beyond cancer (PLWBC), oncology medical providers (OMPs) and exercise professionals (EPs), regarding exercise engagement and service provision in cancer care. Secondary objective: Explore participants' perspectives on how to make community-based group exercise programs accessible, engaging, and inclusive of diverse needs and preferences.

Methods:

PLWBC were recruited from the community and OMPs/EPs recruited from public hospitals and community in NSW, Australia.

PLWBC participated in online focus groups. OMPs and EPs completed one-on-one interviews. Discussions centred on exercise engagement post-diagnosis, the quality of exercise advice received, personal and system-level barriers affecting referral and adherence, and suggestions for improving service delivery. Qualitative data was coded using NVivo and thematic analysis was used to identify key themes from the data.

Results:

Fifteen PLWBC, 7 OMPs and 5 EPs participated between May 2024 and October 2025. Four themes emerged: Challenges integrating exercise into cancer care pathways; Designing flexible and inclusive service models; Enhancing exercise readiness, self-efficacy, and ongoing motivation; Building organisational capacity and workforce confidence. Both PLWBC and OMPs highlighted the importance of timely and consistent guidance, including accurate and available resources. Tailored support and adaptability within group settings were viewed as essential for meeting diverse needs effectively. Participants expressed a preference for a hybrid delivery model combining in-person and online group exercise sessions.

Conclusion:

The findings provide rich data and actionable insights which can be implemented into existing practice. Future work will focus on upskilling EPs in the workforce to enhance availability of suitable services and optimising referral pathways.

Keywords

Exercise Physiology, implementation, referral pathways, qualitative

Conflict of Interest & Ethical Approval

yes

Abstract submitters declaration

yes

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