

Ovarian Cancer: Hope On The Horizon



As cancers go, ovarian cancer is a tricky one. It doesn't have anywhere near the cure rates of other cancers that predominantly affect women, such as breast cancer, and it is often diagnosed late. That's what happened with my mother – although by the time she passed away, four years ago, it was clear there was movement on the horizon: oncologists were eyeing off new treatment plans and there was talk of advances in the research area. Recently, I spoke to two people involved in ovarian cancer research to discover the positives around this stealthy killer.

“We foresee that ovarian cancer will be a curable disease”

Lucinda Nolan is the CEO of the Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation, the leading independent funder of ovarian cancer research in Australia.



“Our 2020 research audit, the State of the Nation report, found that treatments for ovarian cancer hadn't shifted much over the last 30 years, and its survivability rates have been left behind in modern cancer. We came up with three goals, one of which was committing to funding the more promising and innovative treatments that we have.

“Precision medicine research is exciting because it allows very quick

promise in the treatment of ovarian cancer. A woman can come in, a sample can be taken and tested against which drugs will have the most impact, and that can be fed back to her clinician very quickly.

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“Current treatments focus more on extending lives rather than being a cure for ovarian cancer. The real game-changer will be early detection. At the moment, ovarian cancer can be curable if it’s found very early, but generally it’s a silent killer – 70 per cent of cases only diagnosed when the cancer is in the advanced stages. The reality is that many women either don’t have any symptoms or those symptoms are so mild that they’re unable to recognise there’s something seriously wrong with them.

“Saving women’s lives lies not only in the treatments that will help them live longer but also the detection tests for the next generation of women. An early detection test is another goal. We have some exciting news coming out about it in the next couple of weeks, and it will be a world-first. We foresee that ovarian cancer will be a curable disease, and not such a lethal one.”

“I’m incredibly buoyed by the progress.”

Dr Maree Bilandzic is an OCRF-funded ovarian cancer researcher at Melbourne’s Hudson Institute of Medical Research.



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gaining a lot more recognition through powerful awareness campaigns, often fuelled by women who are actually battling the disease.

“In the long term, the key to eradicating it is detection; we know if we catch the cancer at its earliest stages, our patients have a 90 per cent chance of surviving.

“There are a lot of new approaches [to ovarian cancer] being trialled. The Cancer Council in Victoria, for instance, lets you know what clinical trials are running. If I was a patient, and my treatment wasn't working well, I'd ask my oncologist, 'Is there another way of tackling this?' You can be proactive; it's your body.

“Our precision medicine project works on the basis that none of us are the same. How I respond to a particular treatment isn't the same as another person. The analogy I give is that I can try on a beautiful dress but if it's not my cut or colour, it won't look good.

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“I am hopeful for the future of ovarian cancer research. Look at what Australian scientists have achieved with the cervical cancer vaccine and advances in breast cancer. And women are no longer afraid of talking and sharing their experiences with ovarian cancer.

“I don't know if it's something to do with being below the belt, but traditionally women don't talk about these issues. It's odd, because you feel like so many people are oversharing at the moment in other areas, but with things that matter, you often don't talk about it. But when I look at what's ahead for the next

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