

Australia-first study of ovarian cancer diagnosis

Ovarian cancer is the sixth most common cause of cancer death among Australian women – with two women dying from this cancer every day.

This is the first time that researchers have studied this journey and it is hoped the findings will provide a valuable insight for Australian clinicians and policy makers.

Unfortunately, by the time it is diagnosed about 75% of ovarian cancers have spread beyond the ovaries. At this advanced stage, treatment is less likely to be successful. For this reason ovarian cancer is sometimes called the silent killer.

Diagnosis of ovarian cancer is difficult because the symptoms it causes are often non-specific.

Women who are diagnosed with ovarian cancer often report that they had to visit multiple doctors over a long period of time before their cancer was diagnosed. But the extent of this problem has never been studied.

To address this, researchers from the Queensland Institute of Medical Research (QIMR), The University of Queensland and The

National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre have studied the journey taken by almost 1,500 Australian women from the first time they suspected something wrong to when they were finally diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Ovarian cancer facts

Approximately 1,200 Australian women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year.

In 2006, 795 women died from ovarian cancer in Australia.

Ovarian cancer is the sixth most common cause of cancer death among Australian women.

Possible symptoms of ovarian cancer include abdominal or back pain, bloating or feeling full, frequent urination, fatigue, loss of appetite, indigestion or heartburn, and unexplained weight loss or weight gain.

Dr Penny Webb, Head of QIMR's Gynaecological Cancer Group, explained, "We found that 66% of ovarian cancers were diagnosed within one month of women first seeing their doctor and 80% were diagnosed within three months."

"Only 15% of women reported visiting more than three different doctors before their cancer was diagnosed," said Dr Webb.

"However, we also found that for 12% of women, the diagnostic process took longer than 6 months."

Dr Webb said this was more likely for women living in remote Australia, those with lower incomes, and those who reported abdominal pain or bowel symptoms, or multiple symptoms to their doctor. These factors will be studied in the future.

The research was published in *Medical Journal of Australia* and more information is available online at www.qimr.edu.au.



Queensland Institute of
Medical Research

About QIMR

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More information about QIMR can be found at www.qimr.edu.au