

RAISING AWARENESS: OvCa AUSTRALIA

**S Lee**

*OvCa Australia
Fitzroy, VIC*

Over the past three years the growth of the ovarian cancer consumer movement has raised community consciousness of ovarian cancer and its impact on patients and their families.

Through media campaigns (TV, newspapers, women's and lifestyle magazines), a website, presentations to community groups and the distribution of information leaflets through health centres, ovarian cancer has a much higher profile. Many are now aware that ovarian cancer is the fifth most common cause of cancer death in women; that vague, non-specific symptoms do exist; that family history can highlight additional risk factors; and that for most women knowledge and awareness is their best defence in the absence of an effective screening program. Seeking treatment early could make a major difference in outcome for many ovarian cancer patients.

Involvement of ovarian cancer patients and their families with OvCa Australia has led to the formation of a number of local support groups and networks that have helped patients cope with their condition and overcome the severe isolation that many experience.

OvCa Australia is an active participant in GP education forums, disseminates information through the Divisions of Practice and will be present at the next General Practitioner Conference and Exhibition. A prime objective has been to highlight the need for GPs to consider their approach to the management of women who present with vague abdominal/pelvic disorders and the importance of ruling out ovarian cancer as a cause. An

educational project is being planned to target GPs, other clinicians and healthcare professionals.

Ensuring women and GPs understand the importance of appropriate referral when ovarian cancer is suspected has been another key message delivered to the public. Only 50% of ovarian cancer patients are currently being treated by a gynaecologic oncologist. Studies strongly indicate that survival and quality of life are much better in those who are treated by a specialist surgeon.

Consumer advocates have been involved in the development of the Australian Cancer Network Clinical Management Guidelines and an accompanying consumer publication, as well as several projects within the National Breast Cancer Centre's Ovarian Cancer Program. OvCa Australia was a co-host of the first ovarian cancer workshop for researchers and clinicians and will assist in planning and managing a similar event in 2004.

In the past two years National Ovarian Cancer Awareness Week has gained a great deal of public interest as well as the support and involvement of many research institutes and organisations such as the state Cancer Councils. Besides promoting the key awareness messages, the week provides an opportunity to raise much needed funds for research. The awareness week has gained support from corporate sponsors and has led to a number of major cause-related marketing initiatives.

OvCa Australia promotes the importance of effective diagnostic tests and believes that greater investment for research into early detection is paramount. Next year OvCa Australia plans to offer funds to support further research.

A major obstacle to the delivery of health promotion messages has been the lack of study data about ovarian cancer. This should change in the next few years when Australian Ovarian Cancer Study will deliver a quality evidence-base with respect to symptoms, risk factors and prevention.