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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

MATTERS OF PUBLIC INTEREST

Ovarian Cancer

SPEECH

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Speaker Polley, Sen Helen

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Senator POLLEY (Tasmania) (12.45 pm)—I want to talk today about the alarm I felt when I was reading startling statistics associated with ovarian cancer after receiving information from a peak awareness body. The resources Ovarian Cancer Australia provided were most informative and I owe some references in this speech to that information. I would also like to note the report that I had the privilege to work on with the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs. In 2006 we brought down the report *Breaking the silence: a national voice for gynaecological cancers*. I see Senator Johnston nodding. This chamber was deeply affected by the passing of a former senator from this terrible disease and, unfortunately, I am sure we can all recall family and friends who have been affected by this terrible form of cancer.

Like many in the community, I had certain views about ovarian cancer, such as that it received the same attention as breast cancer and cervical cancer. I assumed there were regular, simple tests that could be conducted to detect possible abnormalities that might lead to ovarian cancer in its earliest stages until I took part in the hearings of that community affairs committee inquiry. I was reminded of that when receiving the information recently from Ovarian Cancer Australia. I assumed that, although it would invariably take some lives, they would be in the minority and that a woman diagnosed with the disease stood as much chance of good health and survival as the victims of other sorts of cancer. But I was rudely and deeply shocked when I realised that each and every one of these assumptions was quite simply wrong.

Ovarian cancer is one of the most lethal gynaecological cancers there is. However, this is not due to the cancer being difficult to treat. In fact, early detection and treatment results in a 90 per cent full recovery rate. The tragic loss of lives comes down to timely detection, because the symptoms of ovarian cancer are often ones that women experience in a number of low-level health complaints. Detection normally does not occur until the cancer is well advanced, and it is this sorry fact that brings the statistics into frightening reality. In 2008-09 approximately 1,500 women were diagnosed with one of the four types of ovarian cancer in Australia. Sadly, another 850 lost their battle. That is one woman every 11 hours: a family left without a mother; a husband left without his soul mate; a daughter leaving her parents

broken-hearted. Ovarian cancer rates as the eighth largest cause of cancer diagnosis in this country, yet it is the sixth largest killer of women by any means. The onset of ovarian cancer can be linked in part to genetic disposition, which increases a person's likelihood of experiencing the disease. It can also be linked to one of several risk factors: ethnicity, standards of living and issues related to reproduction and contraception. Exposure to fertility drugs, a high-fat diet, weight and contact with some substances can all contribute to the possibility of developing ovarian cancer. However, you can also be of any age, of any ethnicity and from any background and possess all or none of the identified risk factors and still develop this disease. Teenagers, young women and older women have all been known to develop ovarian cancer, and that is what makes this a truly terrifying and indiscriminate form of cancer.

Sadly, if any female in this chamber were diagnosed with ovarian cancer tomorrow her chances of survival after five years would be only 42 per cent. These are terrible odds that would condemn any woman to five years of uncertainty and despair over whether she would be one of the lucky or unlucky ones. Treatment will often include surgery that removes part or all of a woman's reproductive organs, either reducing—or, indeed, completely ending—their prospects of having children in their lifetime. This may seem unimportant to a third person when considering the importance of treatment and cure over reproduction, but it adds to the terrible emotional turmoil a woman and her family would experience when undergoing treatment. Not only must she fear for her own longevity but she must also mourn the loss of children she may never have. If I were given a 58 per cent chance of being struck by lightning in the next five years, I would probably stay indoors. If it were a 58 per cent chance of being killed in a car accident, I would probably walk everywhere. So imagine being given a 58 per cent chance of a cancer taking your life. It is an unimaginable scenario that 1,500 Australian women find themselves in each year in this country. And the most frustrating and maddening part is that the mortality rate is only this high because we know too little of the symptoms of ovarian cancer and attribute them to more common ailments.

No woman wants to be seen to be exaggerating their health complaints. We all have so much to do from

day to day that a bit of soreness here or indigestion there is simply buried beneath the multiple other conflicting priorities in our lives. We downplay the importance of minor symptoms because we simply do not have the time in our lives between work, family, domestic responsibilities and everything else to visit a doctor and voice our concerns. What adds to this is the increasing inability of people in some areas of Australia, particularly rural Australia, to access GPs. Additionally, too often we rely on doctors to monitor us and flag possible health issues on our behalf. There is often an assumption that all the knowledge we need in this world is held by someone else and that they will let us know what we need to know when we need to know it.

The reality of ovarian cancer mortality rates is testament to the fact that we must arm ourselves and our loved ones with knowledge and not be afraid to ask questions or get advice. We must never feel too silly or shy to ask what we may feel is a stupid question when it comes to our health. We are the best defence against our own possible illnesses and injury and no woman should ignore the importance of knowing what they need to know to protect their health.

Unfortunately, ovarian cancer has not had the exposure of many other innately 'female' cancers. Kylie Minogue brought breast screenings into high demand and self-checks became an important and recognised part of a woman's routine. The death of British celebrity Jade Goody from cervical cancer almost a year ago brought the harsh reality of that particular cancer to the fore. The passing of Jane McGrath from breast cancer caused an international community to mourn the loss of a woman whose death showed us that it could happen to any of us. Both were mothers, wives and daughters. But ovarian cancer has not had the same exposure. It seems a sad and sorry reality that it requires a high-profile brush with cancer to get the rest of us to understand the seriousness of a disease of this form. It should be real to us regardless of who has suffered from it. Eight hundred and fifty women a year in Australia prove the fact that this form of cancer is dangerously real. We are the only means of preventing ourselves from joining them.

Knowing the symptoms is the best form of early detection. As yet there is no reliable test for the early detection of ovarian cancer, nor is there a regular screening program as there is for breast cancer. Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month—this month—organised by Ovarian Cancer Australia, is focused very much on encouraging women to know the symptoms. The symptoms may be common, but the key is that if these symptoms are new to you, if they persist for more than two weeks or if you have them every day let this be the trigger for you to seek medical advice. A doctor may be

able to attribute these symptoms to a minor complaint, but if not it will help lead towards early detection and greatly increase the chance of survival.

This is where the awareness campaign being promoted by Ovarian Cancer Australia is of the highest importance. We must push past the lack of knowledge that we as a society generally have about ovarian cancer. We must also push beyond the mentality that minor health complaints are only ever minor. Arming our mothers, wives, girlfriends, daughters and friends with the knowledge about this most lethal of cancers is surely the best way of arresting the alarming statistics. Rather than listing the possible symptoms, I would instead encourage all women to view the 'symptom diary' on the Ovarian Cancer Australia website. This can be found at www.ovariancancer.net.au. I urge people to share this information and check out the website. I visited it again before I came into the chamber. It is about arming ourselves with the knowledge which I believe will dramatically reduce the statistics.

Ovarian Cancer Australia and its website provide invaluable resources for people dealing with the disease or those who have concerns. It is about getting to know the symptoms. I am genuinely moved by the efforts of people and groups in this country who advocate and raise awareness of issues that are close to their hearts. Ovarian Cancer Australia is the only consumer representative group for sufferers of this cancer in Australia. They do a stellar job of providing practical and pertinent information for any person with an interest in this disease.

Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month will culminate in a day of focus on 24 February. People are encouraged to purchase and wear a teal ribbon, as I will be doing, to promote this cause and raise much needed funds for awareness and support programs for sufferers, their families and their carers. Increased awareness of the disease will greatly serve to support the efforts of clinical trials and research groups. Clinical trials are working to increase our knowledge of such areas as environmental and genetic risk factors for ovarian cancer, the genetic changes that can influence the growth of the cancer and its responsiveness to treatment and, finally, methods for improving the diagnosis of less common forms of ovarian cancer.

Research is largely focused on identifying the changes that can lead to development of cancer, improving treatments through predicting the response of the disease to treatment and, finally, improving the support pathways for patients and their families who are impacted by this deadly disease. With so much hope of reducing the sad statistics of ovarian cancer through a simple campaign of self-education, I hope that we

can all find time this month to teach ourselves and our family about the importance of this health issue.