

PRESS RELEASE

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'Shocking' ovarian cancer survival rates must be improved

Better access to modern diagnostic technology - and a clear focus on early detection - are needed to reduce the shocking fatality rates associated with ovarian cancer.

As we mark Teal Ribbon Day (26 February) to raise awareness of ovarian cancer, the Australian Diagnostic imaging Association (ADIA) is calling for changes to Medicare to help tackle this silent killer.

"This year some 1,400 Australian women will be diagnosed with ovarian cancer and shockingly a quarter of them will succumb to it within 12 months," said ADIA President, Dr Christian Wriedt.

Only 40% of women with ovarian cancer will survive five years, compared to 88% of women with breast cancer. One of the major factors for this is that ovarian cancer is most often diagnosed at an advanced stage.

"Australia has an extremely successful screening process for breast cancer but we need a stronger focus on ovarian cancer," Dr Wriedt said.

"Because the initial symptoms of ovarian cancer are tricky to diagnose we need to systemically err on the side of caution and use diagnostic imaging earlier to see if there is an issue or not."

The early detection of gynaecological cancers depends heavily on quality medical imaging services, including Ultrasound, Computed Tomography (CT) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI), all of which play an important role in the characterisation and diagnosis of primary ovarian lesions.

Other imaging modalities such as Positron Emission Tomography (PET) and Nuclear Medicine also play an important role in those patients with confirmed ovarian cancer, requiring staging of the disease process or monitoring of response to treatment.

Access is lacking

However, Medicare funding restrictions are limiting our ability to increase life-saving screening for ovarian cancer.

"The fact is that some of the imaging services required to detect, monitor and treat ovarian cancer are not covered by Medicare - they are out-of-pocket expenses, so instead of encouraging women to be tested the system is scaring away many due to cost," Dr Wriedt said.

"As an industry we have tried extremely hard to keep costs down but we can't do the impossible," he said, adding that Medicare rebates for diagnostic imaging as a whole haven't been indexed since 1998.

Even for those women able to pay the ever increasing cost of diagnostic imaging, current Medicare licensing settings limit access to MRI exams in Australia.

"Because of that Australians only have access to about half the number of MRI services as the OECD average," Dr Wriedt said.

"This means women are at unnecessary risk of late detection leading to early death."

Early diagnosis, through diagnostic imaging, maximises the opportunity to treat ovarian cancer in the best possible way, with early treatment shown to slow disease progression and improve long term outcomes.

But at the moment patients with chronic diseases such as ovarian cancer face an unfair, uphill battle to meet the out-of-pocket expenses incurred for medical services, including diagnostic imaging, as well as having limited access to the most clinically appropriate services.

ADIA

ADIA represents medical imaging practices throughout Australia, both in the community and in hospitals. It promotes the ongoing development of quality accreditation standards and appropriate funding settings so that Australians can have affordable access to quality medical imaging services. This supports medical imaging's central role in the diagnosis, treatment and management of a broad range of conditions in every branch of medicine.

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