

Ovarian cancer advance

EXCLUSIVE BRIGID O'CONNELL

MELBOURNE researchers are testing whether transforming rogue immune cells that allow cancer to survive can treat the most aggressive form of ovarian cancer.

There is no early detection test for ovarian cancer, and up to five Australian women are diagnosed each day. Fewer than half will still be alive five years later. But a new project is looking at how immune cells can be hijacked by tumours and is focusing on a protein in these cells.

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Attack on rogue cells

Immune failure may be key to ovarian cancer

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MELBOURNE researchers are testing whether transforming rogue immune cells that allow cancer to survive can be a radical new way of treating the most aggressive form of ovarian cancer.

This project is one of two sharing in \$550,000 from the Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation, a charity that is filling a critical gap in funding early stage research.

There is no early detection test for ovarian cancer, and up to five Australian women are diagnosed each day. Fewer than half will still be alive five years later.

Ashleigh Poh, from the Olivia Newton John Cancer Research Institute and Latrobe University's School of Cancer Medicine, is co-leading a project looking at how immune cells can be hijacked by tumours, so instead of "cleaning up" cellular debris they help cancer grow.

Their focus is on HCK, a protein found on these immune cells.

Dr Poh has found not only can anti-HCK drugs slow the growth and spread of high-grade ovarian cancer in mice, but they also make existing therapies more effective.

She said the OCRF funding would allow the team to con-

tinue its preclinical studies, as well as retrospectively analyse patient datasets to determine which women may have benefited from the therapies.

"These findings really suggest to us that targeting HCK in combination with existing therapies could potentially lead to the development of new therapies and improve treatment outcomes for patients across a broad range of cancers," Dr Poh said.

The other funded project will be led by the Hudson Institute of Medical Research, also looking for a new treatment for ovarian cancer.

Professor Ron Firestein is investigating ways to disrupt

how a protein boosts the ability of cancer cells to grow and spread.

OCRF chief Lucinda Nolan said the foundation aimed to overturn dismal survival rates by supporting research "in as many varied ways as possible"; from prevention through to new treatments.

"Early detection is also a big focus. If we can get that right, survivability rates will be well and truly in the 90 per cent," Ms Nolan said.

"There is no easy fix, but we know that with sustained funding and attention we can make some big gains such as what's

been seen in the other women's cancers."

Melbourne nurse Annabel Dance was diagnosed with ovarian cancer 2½ years ago. The 48-year-old had surgery and six rounds of chemotherapy, and another six rounds a year later when the cancer returned.

As she prepares for her final chemo cycle next week, Ms Dance said more research was needed to save more lives and stop women living with the constant terror of recurrence.

“I’m lucky with my ovarian cancer in a lot of ways. A lot of women can’t tolerate some of the different chemos that are available, the drugs just don’t work for them or they become resistant to treatment,” she said. “The number of women who died from ovarian cancer last year is pretty much equal to the national road toll, but the money spent on ovarian cancer is not equal.”

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Annabel Dance