Quest for a guide to survival

More than 1200 women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year but little is known about how lifestyle factors impact the disease

NO SYMPTOMS: Merran Williams, of Buderim, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer five years ago; researcher Penny Webb (below left) plans to study what impacts certain behaviours can have on the disease. Main picture: Glenn Barnes

JANELLE MILES

MERRAN Williams knows intimately how ovarian cancer invades by stealth, flying under the radar with little or no warning until it hits with maximum impact.

She was working full time as a nurse and feeling healthy when she went for a routine gynaecological check-up.

"I wasn't tired," she recalls. "I was coping really well. I didn't have any symptoms, no bloating or anything like that."

Despite having worked as a gynaecological nurse in the past, she was ill-prepared for what her doctor found – advanced ovarian cancer.

Both her ovaries were affected and the cancer had spread.

"I had one spot that was near the bowel," she says.

That was in December 2008. She was 55 at the time.

Like Williams, more than 1200 Australian women are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year, many of them at an advanced stage. Only 43 per cent are still alive five years post-diagnosis.

But after having surgery to remove the cancer, followed by four months of chemotherapy, Williams is doing well – with no signs of the disease returning – as she approaches the fifth anniversary of one of the worst days of her life.

She's worked hard to try to reduce her cancer risk, exercising regularly, giving up full-time work to slash her stress levels and changing her diet to include more fruit and vegetables and less red meat.

"I do lots of things to keep my whole system working really well," Williams says.

"I'm doing more exercise than I ever did before.

"Even if I don't feel like it, I'll go and do aqua aerobics.

"I'll have at least one walk a day and sometimes two.

"I also work hard at having a still mind. Stress is the worst thing."

The Sunshine Coast woman sees a naturopath regularly and is active in a support group for women with gynaecological cancer.

"How we eat, how we keep our minds still, how we balance our lives, that can affect treatment outcomes," she says with conviction.

But there's little research to show whether lifestyle factors actually play a role in ovarian cancer survival or quality of life.

That dearth of knowledge has prompted Queensland Institute of Medical Research scientist Penny Webb to launch the Ovarian Cancer Prognosis and Lifestyle – OPAL – study to find out.

"Women with ovarian cancer were ringing me and asking me what they should do in terms of whether they should or shouldn't eat certain foods, to try and beat their cancer," she says.

"They're often looking for things to help improve their outcomes.

"I realised I didn't know the answer and when I went looking in the scientific literature, there wasn't really any evidence there either.

"We don't know at the moment how lifestyle, things like drinking alcohol, aspects of diet, exercise and perhaps even taking some common medications like aspirin, whether they might actually influence what happens in ovarian cancer."

Associate Professor Webb will recruit 1200 women across Australia who have been newly diagnosed with ovarian cancer and study them over a period of time.

Of particular interest will be whether dietary supplements help or hinder survival and whether other components of diet, such as phytoestrogens, which are commonly found in soy products, are beneficial or not.

"A lot of people take vitamin supplements and I think people with cancer often assume that taking vitamins is going to be good," Webb says. "But I don't think we really know enough to say whether it's good or not."

She says it's possible, for example, that high levels of anti-oxidants in vitamins might actually reduce the effects of other treatment, such as chemotherapy.

> **How we eat, how we keep our minds still, how we balance our lives, that can affect treatment outcomes**

"That's certainly been suggested," Webb says.

Study participants will also be asked for a blood sample so that future research can probe whether genetic factors can influence a woman's outcome, including how she responds to chemotherapy.

The research is funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Williams praises the research for focusing on what women with ovarian cancer can do for themselves.

Despite her cancer experience, she feels fortunate she was diagnosed before the disease had a chance to spread further throughout her body.

"I was just lucky I had the check-up when I did," the mother of three says.

"By the time a lot of women find out they've got ovarian cancer, it's everywhere.

"It's really hard for them."

For more information about the study, phone the OPAL Helpline on 1800 222 600 or email opalstudy@qimr.edu.au

To donate to QIMR, visit qimr.edu.au

Women with gynaecological cancer who would like to join Merran Williams' support group can email merranp@gmail.com

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PLAIN SCIENCE A ROUND-UP OF THE EXTRAORDINARY

OBESITY LINKED TO MELANOMA

A GENE implicated in obesity has also been found to play a role in melanoma.

New research, published in *Nature Genetics*, has identified a genetic variation in the FTO gene which increases a person's risk of melanoma, the deadliest of skin cancers, by about 16 per cent.

Queensland Institute of Medical Research geneticist Matthew Law, who was part of the international collaboration which identified the mutation, says it is found in about 29 per cent of the population.

Law says different parts of the gene are involved in melanoma and obesity. More research is needed to work out how the FTO gene influences melanoma biology.

The gene is one of about 15 linked to melanoma but Law says, as in most cases of cancer, a combination of genetic and environmental influences are needed to trigger the illness. He says the major risk factor for melanoma is still sun exposure.

CAMELS ONCE ROAMED ARCTIC

CAMELS once foraged in Arctic forests, according to a research team led by the Canadian Museum of Nature.

The team has identified the first evidence of an extinct giant camel in Canada's High Arctic, with the discovery based on 30 fossil

fragments of a leg bone found on Ellesmere Island, Nunavut. The finding, according to a museum release, represents the most northerly record for early camels, whose ancestors are known to have originated in North America some 45 million years ago.

"It extends the previous range of camels in North America northward by about 1200km, and suggests the lineage that gave rise to modern camels may have been originally adapted to living in an Arctic forest environment," says vertebrate palaeontologist Dr Natalia Rybczynski.