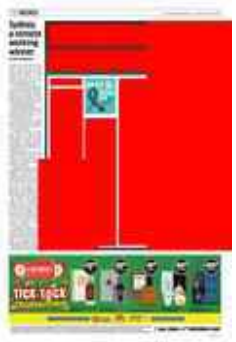
DON'T LET MUM'S DEATH BE IN VAIN

By EXCLUSIVE Kaitlyn Hudson-O'Farrell

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DON'T LET MUM'S DEATH BE IN VAIN

DAUGHTER'S PLEA FOR OVARIAN CANCER CASH

EXCLUSIVE
Kaitlyn Hudson-O'Farrell

Sabrina Damiano was too young to remember losing her mother Antonietta to ovarian cancer.

The Sydney woman was only three and her little brother Ben just six months old when the disease claimed their mother's life at the age of 29, more than 35 years ago.

It's why Ms Damiano has written to federal Health Minister Mark Butler today to ask him to ensure that "no other child grows up without their mother".

She joins a growing chorus of families, experts and politicians backing The Sunday Telegraph and Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation's (OCRF) "Over It" campaign, which is calling for $84m in dedicated research funding over four years.

"My brother and I don't really have any memories of Mum," Ms Damiano said. "We were primarily raised by our grandparents, our aunties and uncles. It was never a secret that our mum had passed away. From what we know, my mum was just the best person, the kindest person, just always so sweet and giving and just a lovely and dedicated mother.

"But it was too painful I think for our family to talk about her. We never really got to know her until we were much older."

Antonietta had complained of back pain, fatigue and sickness, but her symptoms were dismissed as being related to her pregnancy with Ben.

"They're such vague symptoms that no one would have ever thought that mum had ovarian cancer, not in a million years," Ms Damiano said. "After Ben was born, she was in hospital for an extra two weeks. They did a whole bunch of tests and things on her, but obviously nothing meaningful because nothing was found.

"She came home from hospital, but she kept having night sweats all the time.

"It was only because one of my grandmothers cleaned the house of an oncologist that they ended up going to see him.

"Once they'd done the scans, that was it – there was nothing they could do.

"It (the cancer) was basically everywhere.

"Back then there wasn't like stage one, stage two, it was just like, 'you have terminal ovarian cancer, you have six months to live' – and she literally did have six months on the dot."

For Ben Damiano, the absence of his mum is "a shadow ... something there that you'll just never be able to answer".

Both siblings are now advocates for ovarian cancer research and testing, in the hope that Antonietta's death will not be "in vain".

"We don't want anyone else to lose a mother, a sister, aunty, child, or to experience any of the pain that we've experienced," Ms Damiano said, adding that they also wanted "to keep Mum's legacy alive".

"I get women coming up to me today who say 'oh, I had a Pap smear because of you', when Pap smears can't detect ovarian cancer. We're still nowhere near where we need to be (on early-detection testing and awareness)."

It's a call echoed by Canberra's policymakers, with Liberal Senator Anne Ruston to raise the funding plea with Mr Butler after she lost her long-time friend Carol Bristow to ovarian cancer in 2015.

"My dear friend of nearly 20 years Carol died within 12 months of her diagnosis, before her 50th birthday. She was a force of nature," Ms Ruston said. "It is entirely reasonable to expect fairness in cancer funding. I'll be raising OCRF's concerns with the minister."

Independent MP Monique Ryan said ovarian cancer patients "deserve the same progress we've seen in other cancers".

"Breast cancer survival rose to over 90 per cent because of sustained investment," Dr Ryan said. "Ovarian cancer has received less than 1 per cent of Australian government medical research funding over the past decade. The poor survival rates for ovarian cancer tell us we've left these women behind.

"We know what to do, we just haven't done it."

Independent MP Zali Steggall said the $84m investment could make "a massive difference".

"My message to Minister Butler is simple: women with ovarian cancer can't afford to wait any longer," she said.

Fellow independent MP Allegra Spender said ovarian cancer's five-year survival rate of 49 per cent was "shocking" and "horrifying".

"We need more investment," she said. "The current funding allocations just aren't working."

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An open letter to Mark Butler

Dear Health Minister Butler,

My name is Sabrina Damiano. My mother, Antonietta Damiano, died of ovarian cancer at age 29. I was three years old, and my brother, Ben, was just seven months old.

Both of us don't really have any memories of Mum and, devastatingly, we only have one family photo of us all together, as Mum was so sick right after Ben was born.

While pregnant with my brother, she went to the doctor about a persistent backache and fatigue. Each symptom was dismissed and attributed to pregnancy.

When my brother was born in May, she stayed in hospital for an additional week due to ongoing sickness, but despite some minor blood work, no meaningful tests were conducted.

It wasn't until two weeks later on my dad Angelo's suggestion (fed up with Mum's night sweats), that she went back to her GP who referred her for ultrasounds, then to an oncologist, which ultimately showed terminal ovarian cancer. The cancer had spread throughout the pregnancy.

In June, they gave her six months to live. By December she was dead. She had just turned 29.

My brother and I were raised by our loving grandparents and extended family, and while it was never a secret Mum had died, it was almost too painful for them to share stories or memories of her.

It wasn't until later in life that Ben and I got to know Mum and her stories. She was a sonographer who was good at her job. She was hardworking and financially savvy.

She was a beautiful, kind, caring, family-oriented person.

Both her and my dad worked really hard to give Ben and I the most beautiful life and it got cut tragically short.

Ovarian cancer is known as the "silent killer" because once symptoms are prevalent, it is almost too late. Shockingly, in the 37 years since Mum's death, survival statistics have only marginally improved.

Please, we urgently need additional funding to facilitate pre-emptive testing – just like we have for breast or cervical cancer.

More money is more resources, more research, more ability to test, more education, more awareness, more doctors and more oncologists.

We don't want anyone else to lose a mother, a sister, an aunty, a child, or to experience any of the pain we've experienced.

It's important to Ben and I to keep our mum's legacy alive, as we would hate to think her death was in vain.

Antonietta Damiano (in pink) with her daughter Sabrina and husband Angelo, and (left) Sabrina with her brother Ben today.

Sabrina Damiano lost her mum to ovarian cancer and is now calling on Health Minister Mark Butler (inset above) to fund research and testing for the disease. Picture: Jonathan Ng

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Liberal Senator Anne Ruston (on right) with her friend Carol Bristow, who died from ovarian cancer in 2015.

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