

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**Ovarian cancer blood test could save lives in regional Australia: researchers**

A simple blood test by a GP to diagnose ovarian cancer may be one step closer for women in regional and rural Australia through a ground-breaking research project.

Funded in part by the Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation, which today launched a landmark *State of the Nation in Ovarian Cancer: Research Audit*, the research project would benefit women with limited or no access to specialised scanning equipment.

Professor Magdalena Plebanski, from RMIT University, is part of a research team seeking further funding to continue the project, which could significantly simplify screening for ovarian cancer.

Professor Plebanski has been working with researchers from the Royal Women's Hospital and the Hudson Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne to identify immune markers in the blood that would signal the presence of ovarian cancer.

"If we could develop a simple blood test this would be particularly helpful for regional areas where MRIs aren't readily available," she said. While she cautioned the research project was in its early stages, "the long-term dream is a yearly test at the GP for ovarian cancer".

Professor Plebanski said the research to date had used samples from women with Stage III and Stage IV ovarian cancer, but researchers were hoping to do further work with other samples to check the test's efficacy in earlier detection of ovarian cancer, which would save lives. The project is one of several in Australia researching testing for ovarian cancer.

The hope is that the research will lead to an early detection test, the lack of which was identified in the *State of the Nation in Ovarian Cancer: Research Audit* as the most significant barrier to improving survival outcomes. The research audit found that an early detection test for ovarian cancer could save the lives of more than 8,000 Australian women over 10 years.

Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation Chief Executive Officer Lucinda Nolan said the report highlighted the urgent need for increased investment in ovarian cancer research in Australia, with an extra \$20 million a year in funding needed to improve the lives of women with ovarian cancer today and find an early detection test for the next generation of women.

"Limited funding in the modern cancer era has stifled breakthroughs, with the five-year survival rate for ovarian cancer stagnating at 46 per cent," Ms Nolan said. "This compares with 91 per cent for breast cancer, 83 per cent for uterine cancer and 71 per cent for cervical cancer.

"In fact, the report found that while the absence of an early detection test was the biggest barrier to women's survival, only 7 per cent of current overall funding in Australia and New Zealand is directed towards finding a test."

Australian Men's Cricket Team head coach Justin Langer, whose mother and grandmother died of ovarian

cancer, supported the call for more funding to find an early detection test.

“Ovarian cancer is the silent killer. It creeps up from nowhere. And that’s why early detection is so important,” Langer said.

“The worst day of my life was the day mum told me she had ovarian cancer. Ovarian cancer is the most lethal of all the women’s cancers. The more funding we can put to this cause, it will save a lot of heartache.”

The *State of the Nation* report comes as University of Melbourne research shows Australian women are dangerously uninformed about ovarian cancer, with 64 per cent wrongly thinking a Pap Smear test could detect ovarian cancer and 68 per cent believing a cervical screening test could do the same.

Other key findings of the *State of the Nation* research audit include:

- More than 1800 women will be diagnosed with ovarian cancer in Australia this year. Only 830 will be alive in 2025. The report shows this is due to the complex biology and subtle symptoms of the disease, which means up to three in four women already have more advanced cancer by the time they are diagnosed.
- Enhanced treatment options would save the lives of more than 680 Australian women between 2025 and 2035 and more than 110,000 women globally;
- A need for a high-impact research program on the disease’s biological cause, and early detection, prevention and treatment to help increase survival rates for the next generation of women.

OCRF commissioned Insight Economics to produce the independent *State of the Nation* report. The report audited current and historical Australian research programs and surveyed 216 people - 154 were patients, their families and carers, and 62 were researchers or clinicians.

Mother of two Kel Pittman was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2014 and is currently managing the disease. “To read that, generally, within five years of diagnosis about half of women die is confronting because all you want is a bit of hope,” Ms Pittman said.

Ms Nolan concluded: “We appreciate COVID-19 is having a huge impact on people’s livelihoods and times are tough financially – but for many, it has also crystalised what is most important: those we love.

“Ovarian cancer is not going away just because we are facing a pandemic. History shows that where communities, governments and industry come together, big improvements in survival can be realised and countless lives saved. While ovarian cancer has been left behind in the past 45 years of modern cancer research, with a similar focus and funding uplift it can be the success story of the next generation. I believe we all have a responsibility to keep fighting to save lives.”

#### **About the Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation**

As the country’s leading funder of early detection research, the Ovarian Cancer Research Foundation has worked tirelessly for 20 years to fill the funding breach aimed at detecting, preventing and curing ovarian cancer – and saving lives. The OCRF is the second largest funder of ovarian cancer research in Australia, behind the Federal Government. It provides 49 per cent of the funding towards early detection research in Australia, followed by other non-government organisations at 32 per cent and the Federal Government at 19 per cent.