



Media Release

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Cancer 'carers' more distressed than patients they care for

Adelaide: Carers of ovarian cancer patients experience high levels of distress and low mental and physical wellbeing, according to research to be presented today (13/11) to a conference of cancer experts.

The study, being presented to the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia's (COSA's) Annual Scientific Meeting, also shows that support for carers is failing to keep pace with their increasing needs.

Lead author, Professor Phyllis Butow from the University of Sydney, said the research showed levels of distress among carers were so high, that the carers were "... often more distressed than the patients, yet they don't receive nearly as much support."

"Our study, which focused on the last year of the patient's life, showed around one in three carers experienced increasing distress in the final year of their loved one's life," Professor Butow said. "That distress translated into poor mental and physical wellbeing."

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire every three months. They were asked to evaluate their quality of life, levels of anxiety and depression, optimism and unmet needs.

"A range of factors contributed to their distress," Professor Butow said. "In the last few months in particular, issues included disappointment about lack of recovery, fear of the cancer spreading, balancing the carer's own needs with those of the patient's, the impact of caring on work and making decisions in the context of uncertainty."

"Our health system focuses almost exclusively on the patient, yet by not meeting the needs carers we are undermining quality of life for both carers and those they care for."

COSA President, Associate Professor Sandro Porceddu, said until now, little had been known about the quality of life and specific needs of carers of ovarian cancer patients.

"Currently, a lot of our support services are targeted to helping patients," Professor Porceddu said. "We need to think more about our carers. Things like flexible work arrangements, support from family and friends or just having someone to talk to, can make a big difference to a carer's wellbeing."

"Carers help keep health costs down by supporting patients at home, as well as reducing hospital admissions. Carers play a vital role in our community. In turn, we need to better support them."

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