



MEDIA RELEASE

Wednesday 18 November 2015

Researchers study impacts of breast cancer on pregnant women

Babies born to women diagnosed with breast cancer have high rates of premature birth but excellent survival rates, according to new research presented today (18/11) at a national meeting of cancer experts in Hobart.

The multidisciplinary research will be presented by Professor Elizabeth Sullivan from the University of Technology Sydney at the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia's Annual Scientific Meeting and focuses on the experiences of women with gestational cancer. The study was funded by the National Breast Cancer Foundation.

"Our national study looked specifically at the outcomes of 47 women in Australia and New Zealand who proceeded with a pregnancy after being diagnosed with breast cancer, or who were diagnosed with breast cancer shortly after giving birth," Professor Sullivan said.

The study found that 77 per cent of women had breast symptoms prior to diagnosis. 65 per cent of women with cancer had their birth induced and in four out of five cases, breast cancer management was the reason for induction. Approximately 42 per cent of babies were born prematurely, 25 per cent of infants were low birth weight and 32 per cent required admission to special care.

"Although it is encouraging that all infants survived, the very high rate of preterm birth is of concern," said Professor Sullivan.

"It is important to balance the treatment needs of the mother with the needs of the child. This study describes current practice and provides a good basis to examine approaches to maternity and cancer management."

"We know that treatments such as chemotherapy can safely be delivered at any time during pregnancy after the first trimester," said Professor Christobel Saunders, investigator and cancer surgeon on the study.

"However, it appears this message is not always getting through to women or their obstetricians who often opt for early delivery rather than undergoing the important cancer treatment during pregnancy.

"It was also encouraging to see that almost half of women diagnosed during pregnancy initiated breast feeding."

The qualitative research from Professor Sullivan's colleagues also highlighted some of the psychological concerns pregnant women with cancer experience.

"Pregnancy is usually a time of joy, but cancer changes that. The combination of expecting new life and having a life threatening illness is psychologically extremely challenging and confronting.

“The key factor that had the biggest impact on a woman’s experience of care was the quality of communication with and between the cancer and maternity care teams. Breast cancer nurses were also highly valued.”

Also speaking at the conference is Kim Hobbs, a social worker at Westmead Hospital, who will share her experience counselling women after they have received a recommendation from their clinician about whether or not to terminate the pregnancy following a cancer diagnosis.

“Women can be diagnosed with cancer at all stages of pregnancy and depending on their individual circumstances, timeframes and impact of treatment, the choice about what to do next can be very difficult.

“The decision about whether or not to terminate is extremely personal and complex. As well as the recommendations of your doctor, there are often personal, religious or cultural views about pregnancy termination that need to be worked through. It’s really important that women get the right support during this time.”

Clinical Oncology Society of Australia President, Professor Mei Krishnasamy, said that it was important for cancer professionals to be across not only the latest medical research on pregnancy and cancer, but also the supportive care needs of patients.

“Pregnancy and cancer is an extremely complex issue,” Professor Krishnasamy said. “It’s encouraging to see some positive evidence about how cancer treatment during pregnancy can be managed, but it’s also necessary to acknowledge that this may not be possible for all women. Either way, support is vital.”

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Notes to editors:

**“Pregnancy and cancer (before, during and after)” will be presented 1:30pm
Wednesday 18th November 2015 at the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia’s
Annual Scientific Meeting, Grand Chancellor, Hobart.**