MEDIA RELEASE

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Australian Ovarian Cancer Study Closing in on a Cure for Women’s Deadliest Cancer

- Australian study associated with more advances in ovarian cancer research in the last five years compared to the previous 20
- More than 2000 bio-specimens donated by Australian women linked to groundbreaking research
- Today is World Ovarian Cancer Day (8 May)

A bank of DNA donated by Australian women could hold the key to finding a cure for ovarian cancer.

The Australian Ovarian Cancer Study (AOCS) is leading the global effort against the deadly disease with more than 2000 bio specimens donated by Australian women linked to more advances in ovarian cancer research in the past five years than the previous two decades.

The AOCS, a bio-specimen bank, has enabled hundreds of ovarian cancer researchers from across Australia and internationally to address clinically important questions about the causes and treatment of ovarian cancer by providing access to DNA, RNA, plasma, serum, and tumour tissue, as well as matched clinical and epidemiological data.

Kristin Young, who was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2009, is just one of thousands of women living with ovarian cancer who hopes to benefit from the new discoveries that the study has prompted.

“I am so thankful to all the women who have donated specimens to the AOCS. Their generosity means that a new generation of researchers and clinicians have the means to develop new treatments, especially targeted to an individual woman’s ovarian cancer type. When the treatment I am on no longer works for me, at least I know there will now be other options for me to try. This gives me hope for the future, Ms Young said.

“Since my diagnosis, there has been a real sea change in how ovarian cancer is being researched and treated around the world.

“Clinical trials are increasing and becoming more accessible, genetic testing is now available to many more women and innovative treatments including new drug combinations are coming into fruition. The AOCS has played a central role in this shift and I am proud to see that Australia is punching above its weight in cancer research.

“Who knows, thanks to the AOCS, we might be standing at the brink of a major breakthrough. With today being World Ovarian Cancer Day, this is good news for me and the some 10,000 Australian women currently living with ovarian cancer,” Ms Young added.

CEO of Ovarian Cancer Australia, Jane Hill, said by helping fund the AOCS, Ovarian Cancer Australia is supporting researchers from across Australia and internationally show to the 350,000 plus women living with ovarian cancer globally that there is hope,” Ms Hill said.

“Recent outcomes from the AOCS are enabling researchers, for the first time in the history of ovarian cancer research, to close in on a cure for the disease, with Australia at the forefront,” she said.

The AOCS has led to a number of key advances in the understanding of ovarian cancer and trials including:

- The way that ovarian cancer is diagnosed and assigned different pathological types.
Understanding the biology of ovarian cancer has resulted in the development of more personalised treatments for women living with ovarian cancer and has improved survival rates.

- **The discovery of how resistance of tumours to chemotherapy evolves over time.**
  Enabling clinicians to adapt treatments for women living with ovarian cancer to prolong the period of remission and tackle the emergence of drug resistance.

- **A greater understanding of genetics and ovarian cancer.**
  Pioneering changes in patient eligibility for genetic testing so that more women are aware of their genetic predisposition to the disease and can alert their family members of hereditary risk.

- **A greater understanding of the impact of PARP inhibitors in combating high-grade serous cancer.**
  PARP inhibitors are a new class of anti-cancer drug, the most significant new drug to be made available on the PBS. This drug has proven to delay disease recurrence while preserving a good quality of life for women with advanced ovarian cancer.

“The AOCS has enabled more detailed research of the molecular structure of ovarian cancer to improve how the disease is treated. Understanding ovarian cancer is not just one disease but a collection of diseases with different characteristics, behaviours and structures has assisted the design of clinical trials to support improved survival outcomes,” Ms Hill said.

“One such clinical trial is BEACON, which uses a combination of three drugs, including an immunotherapy agent that is targeted to a specific subtype of ovarian cancer was discovered using the AOCS. This is advancing personalised treatment in ovarian cancer which, up to now, has largely relied on drugs first introduced in the 1970s,” Ms Hill said.

The AOCS has also enabled researchers from the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre to investigate chemotherapy resistance in ovarian cancer patients.

“Using the AOCS, researchers from Peter Mac have recently identified four mechanisms of chemotherapy resistance” Ms Hill said.

“This breakthrough has allowed significant research on how to reverse drug resistance in recurrent ovarian cancer with the aim of developing new treatments to improve patient outcomes,” Ms Hill added.

Professor Penny Webb from the QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute and lead researcher for the AOCS said that the study has helped accelerate ovarian cancer research.

“The AOCS is a collaborative research program between clinicians, scientists, patients and advocacy groups, aimed at improving the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of ovarian cancer,” Professor Webb said.

“Until recently, there had been few major developments in ovarian cancer research since the 1970s. The time between new discoveries is now becoming shorter and the speed at which this is happening leaves the research community more confident that we are at a tipping point of a major breakthrough.

“To date, the AOCS has been accessed by 120 approved national and international projects with significant clinical trials currently underway in Australia, Singapore and the United States,” Professor Webb added.

A total of 2456 women with ovarian cancer from all Australian states have consented to take part in the AOCS. The bio-specimens are stored at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre.

In 2018, 1600 Australian women are expected to be diagnosed with ovarian cancer and it is estimated that more than 1000 will die from the disease.
The main symptoms of ovarian cancer include abdominal or pelvic pain, increased abdominal size or persistent abdominal bloating, the need to urinate often or urgently, or feeling full after eating a small amount.

More than 90 per cent of women diagnosed with ovarian cancer experience one or more of the known symptoms. If these symptoms are new and continue over a four-week period, women are encouraged to visit their doctor without delay.

**The four key symptoms of ovarian cancer are:**
- Abdominal or pelvic pain;
- Increased abdominal size or persistent abdominal bloating;
- The need to urinate often or urgently; and
- Feeling full after eating a small amount.

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**About Ovarian Cancer Australia:**
Ovarian Cancer Australia is the independent national organisation that takes action for people affected by ovarian cancer and was founded in 2001 by a group of people who had been affected by ovarian cancer, either themselves or through a loved one. Ovarian Cancer Australia provides support for women and their families, raises community awareness of ovarian cancer, advocates for improved services for women and promotes and funds high impact research. Ovarian Cancer Australia’s vision is to save lives and ensure that no woman with ovarian cancer walks alone. Ovarian Cancer Australia is a member of the World Ovarian Cancer Coalition, which works to raise awareness of ovarian cancer on a global scale.

**About World Ovarian Cancer Day (WOCD):**
WOCD is held each year on 8 May. It was established in 2013, by a group of leaders from ovarian cancer patient advocacy organizations from around the world. These leaders saw the need to take global action to raise awareness about the disease and to bring together the ovarian cancer community in solidarity in the fight against this disease. In 2016, these leaders came together to formally establish the World Ovarian Cancer Coalition. Today, the WOCD campaign is supported by over 130 patient advocacy organizations from around the world and has a social media reach of more than 400,000. WOCD is now the flagship awareness-raising initiative of the World Ovarian Cancer Coalition.