

DR CAROLINE FORD

– on the trail of a diagnostic test for ovarian cancer

University of New South Wales



Breast and ovarian cancer are similar in many ways, but breast cancer has been much better publicised and funded. Few researchers, by comparison, are investigating the ovarian form of the disease – yet around 1,500 women are diagnosed with it in Australia each year. More than 850 will die.

“Ultimately I’d like to see my work lead to a new treatment for ovarian cancer or a diagnostic test,” says Dr Caroline Ford, Research Fellow at the Lowy Cancer Research Centre at the University of New South Wales. “A test would be the holy grail, because there’s currently no clear way to detect the disease at an early stage.”

The absence of an early detection test or clear tumour biomarkers means that ovarian cancer is already at an advanced stage when many women are diagnosed. That’s why it’s crucial to conduct more research into the molecular pathways involved in the disease, to identify possible biomarkers and drug targets.

COMPLEX BIOLOGY

“There’s a critical need for more ‘individualised’ therapeutic strategies based on better understanding of the complex biology of ovarian cancer,” explains 32-year-old Caroline. “We believe a particular signalling pathway, Wnt, plays a key role in ovarian cancer and that investigating this could lead to new types of treatment.”

Having completed her PhD at the University of New South Wales, based in the Virology Research Laboratory at the Prince of Wales Hospital, Caroline then travelled to Toronto, Canada, for a year and Malmö, Sweden, for four years for her postdoctoral work.

A GROWING INTEREST

Her interest in ovarian cancer was sparked after her return to Australia in late 2009. Her previous PhD work and two postdoctoral appointments had been focused on breast cancer. She expanded her findings to other female cancers, and the more she learned about the ovarian form the more fascinated she became.

“While it’s only the ninth most common cancer among Australian women, it’s the fifth most common cause of death from cancer, and survival rates have changed very little since the 1980s,” she says. “I believe this is a disease in which much basic research can be done, and that there’s the opportunity to make significant differences to outcomes.”

GRANT IS A ‘FANTASTIC HELP’

Receiving the Cure Cancer grant has been “a fantastic help” because it allows Caroline to pursue her work as an independent researcher. “It will enable me to determine if our hypothesis is valid and hopefully develop the pilot into a significant long-term research project,” she says.

When not working Caroline enjoys travelling. She lives with her Swedish partner near the beach in Sydney and loves being able to swim before work, especially after five years of living in snowy northern hemisphere countries. She also enjoys photography and yoga.

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