

6 October 2008

Patients given clear advice on signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer

Leading cancer charities together with leading ovarian cancer clinicians and researchers, have joined forces with the Department of Health to make the public aware of the key signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer.

The key messages for ovarian cancer were launched today (6th October 2008) at an event held at the House of Lords and hosted by Baroness Morgan of Drefelin and David Lammy, MP. It follows a focus on ovarian cancer by the Department of Health as part of its work on the National Awareness and Early Detection Initiative, which was announced in the Cancer Reform Strategy in December 2007.

Ovarian cancer is the fourth most common cancer in women, affecting around 6,600 women every year in the UK but, to put this in perspective, the average GP will only see one case ovarian cancer every five years. 70% of those diagnosed with the disease will die within in five years because the disease is usually detected at a late stage. It is hoped that raising awareness of the most common symptoms will give women a better chance of being diagnosed at an earlier stage - women have a 90% chance of surviving beyond the first five years if the cancer is caught early enough.

The most common three symptoms, which women with ovarian cancer experience frequently and persistently are; pelvic and abdominal pain; increased abdominal size/persistent bloating – not bloating that comes and goes; and difficulty eating and feeling full quickly. Other frequent symptoms such as urinary symptoms, changes in bowel habit, extreme fatigue or back pain may also be experienced. It is most likely that these symptoms are not ovarian cancer, but may be present in some women with the disease.

Professor Mike Richards CBE, National Clinical Director for Cancer at the Department of Health, said: "I strongly welcome the ovarian cancer key messages, which are the result of a successful collaboration between all those who know and understand ovarian cancer. I hope the key messages will improve public awareness

of this cancer and thereby lead to better outcomes for patients. The outcome for ovarian cancer is good if diagnosed at an early stage.”

This new advice encourages women to seek medical attention if they are experiencing these symptoms regularly whilst reassuring women that it is still unlikely that these symptoms are caused by a serious problem. This will also give women the confidence about returning to their GP if the symptoms continue or worsen. Women also need to be aware that the risk of getting ovarian cancer increases with age – particularly after the menopause - and to tell their GP if they have two or more cases of ovarian or breast cancer in their close family, as ovarian cancer can sometimes run in families.

David Lammy, MP, lost his mother to ovarian cancer earlier this year and, as a result, is committed to ensuring that other families are aware of the symptoms of ovarian cancer. He comments: “The statistics speak for themselves: too many women are dying from ovarian cancer in the UK. Nearly 4,500 women’s lives might be saved every year if ovarian cancer is diagnosed earlier. We all owe it to the women we love so dearly to be more aware of this disease - so that we can encourage them to seek medical help quickly if we recognise any of the three key symptoms. Today’s announcement sends out a clear message that, contrary to headlines in the media, ovarian cancer is not a ‘silent killer’ and we can all do something to ensure women are diagnosed earlier by being aware of the symptoms and telling others.”

Speakers at the event included actress, Jenny Agutter, and Shen Khan, an ovarian cancer survivor, whilst guests included members of the media and politicians. Baroness Ashton and David Lammy, MP, encouraged them to use their influence to support the main charities concerned with ovarian cancer by helping them to raise awareness of ovarian cancer and encourage women and healthcare professionals to be aware of the recognised symptoms.

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For more media information, please contact:

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Notes to editors:

The key messages for ovarian cancer are the result of a collaboration of experts in ovarian cancer. Further information on ovarian cancer can be found on the following websites:

Cancer Research UK: www.cancerresearchuk.org

The Eve Appeal: www.eveappeal.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support: www.macmillan.org.uk

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk

Ovacome: www.ovacome.org.uk

Ovarian Cancer Action: www.ovarian.org.uk

Target Ovarian Cancer: www.targetovarian.org.uk