



Claire Kirk with her children Callum, 10, and Tyler, 12. Picture: Josie Hayden

TAKING AIM AT KILLER CANCER

EXCLUSIVE
ROBYN RILEY

VICTORIAN women will join a groundbreaking study that may help prevent ovarian cancer.

Led by University of Melbourne's professor Martha Hickey from the Royal Women's Hospital, the study will help determine if the removal of the fallopian tubes – the narrow tubes that connect the ovaries to the uterus – can prevent the devastating cancer that kills about 1000 Australian women every year.

"Our research is about preventing ovarian cancer in women at high risk," Prof Hickey said.

She said recent studies suggested that ovarian cancer may start in the fallopian tubes and spread to the ovaries.

The professor of obstetrics

Victorian study targets disease that claims 1000 women a year

and gynaecology said that while the risk of ovarian cancer in the general population was less than 1 per cent, one in 450 women in Australia were at high risk as they carried a variant of the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene.

"This variant ... substantially increases the risk of certain cancers, of which ovarian cancer is one," she said.

"The only thing women at high risk can do now is to have the ovaries and the fallopian tubes removed.

"This is very effective but should happen before the ages of 35-45, which will cause surgical menopause.

"Our research and those of others worldwide has shown

that surgical menopause can cause severe symptoms in the short term and have serious health problems in the long-term, such as heart disease and possibly dementia."

Prof Hickey said women had been having fallopian tubes removed for many years as a form of permanent contraception.

"So it has been shown that just removing the fallopian tubes doesn't seem to cause health problems," she said.

Prof Hickey said the research would give high-risk women the option of removing the fallopian tubes and having their ovaries removed later.

Her research is one of 13

projects to receive funding from the Victorian Cancer Council announced on Monday as part of its Grants-in-Aid program. This funds research projects on the causes, prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cancer.

Monash University, the Women's, the University of Melbourne, La Trobe University, Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Nutt Lab and the Colorectal Oncogenomic Group were awarded grants.

"Cancer Council Victoria has heavily invested in understanding the causes of cancer, understanding how we better prevent cancer, and in understanding how we can develop

better treatments," its chief executive, Todd Harper, said.

Prof Hickey said the grant would allow researchers to begin the trial in Victoria.

Melbourne mum of two Claire Kirk was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2018 and says this research offers all women hope.

"Ovarian cancer leaves you with a sense of constant dread," Ms Kirk said. "This research promises to help bolster women's chances of prevention before it is too late."

Mum to daughter Tyler, 12, and son Callum, 10, Ms Kirk recently returned to work.

"The kids say the cancer has gone; I don't think I have beaten it. I am learning to live with it and look at it more as a chronic illness, that's how I approach it in my head," she said. "There is always hope."

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