

December 2006

Study boosts breast cancer patients' quality of life

A group of doctors at The Wesley Research Institute is conducting groundbreaking research as part of an Australian and New Zealand study that has the potential to dramatically reduce the pain and suffering of women with early breast cancer.

The project, which is conducted under the auspices of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons in collaboration with the National Health and Medical Research Council Clinical Trials Centre, compares the effects of removing fewer lymph nodes from the armpit to the traditional method of removing all lymph nodes in women with breast cancer.

Called 'Sentinel lymph node biopsy versus axillary clearance (SNAC)', the project is the first large multi-centre randomised study of breast cancer surgical technique designed and conducted in Australia.

Currently, one in ten Australian women are diagnosed with breast cancer. Up to 70 per cent of these women will have most of their lymph glands removed from the armpit as part of their treatment, only to find those lymph glands do not contain cancer.

These women may be spared the potential side effects of the surgery (pain, shoulder stiffness, upper arm numbness and arm swelling) if their lymph glands could be accurately assessed by a less extensive operation.

Chief investigators, Dr Neil Wetzig and Dr Chris Pyke, say the aim of the trial is to show whether the less invasive surgery will result in fewer side effects for the patient whilst not affecting disease progression and survival.

The results from the first twelve months of the study were released in December 2006 and initial findings showed the procedure has a much lower risk of complications for women, such as arm swelling, numbness and immobility.

"As the study is successful in proving that less invasive surgery is an effective treatment for breast cancer, the technique is now likely to be introduced into routine surgical practice for the treatment of small breast cancers," Dr Wetzig said.

"This will mean that women will have better chances of survival, fewer complications from surgery and potentially enhanced quality of life if their tumour is detected earlier," he said.

The project was launched in early 2001 with recruitment of patients closing in mid 2005. 1088 with newly diagnosed breast cancer up to three centimetres in diameter were recruited for the study across Australia and New Zealand.

While the study shows early success of this technique for women with smaller breast cancers, a new study will soon be launched to assess the effectiveness of the technique in larger tumours and where more than one cancer exists in the same breast.

