

COMMITTEES
Community Affairs Committee
Report Speech

Senator CAROL BROWN (Tasmania)—This inquiry into gynaecological cancers provided for many witnesses, particularly cancer survivors and their families, an invaluable opportunity—some for the very first time—to give voice to their concerns and present their views at a national level. We are indeed fortunate in Australia to have access to standards of medical care considered by many to be among the best in the world. Our researchers are often at the forefront and cutting edge of fields of medical inquiry. Our healthcare professionals are to be revered. Our associated consumer advocacy groups and representative bodies show a commitment to the betterment of health outcomes for all Australians, and the spirit of those in need of treatment is so often an inspiration to us all.

The above cross-section of individuals and groups is representative of those who gave evidence to the Senate committee on gynaecological cancer. This depth of interest is indicative of the depth with which health issues are engaged with in this country. This diversity, however, can sometimes be a barrier to ensuring greater utilisation of and coordination and cohesion in the services, support and treatment currently provided. It became evident in the inquiry that bringing people together with experience and expertise in the engagement of treatments, professionals and/or technologies was needed. Sometimes there is too much or conflicting information. Sometimes there is little or none.

I will take this moment to talk about the provision of a national voice for gynaecological cancer. Witnesses giving evidence to the inquiry voiced the opinion that a national approach to gynaecological cancers, with the accompanying establishment of a dedicated body, would make a significant difference to the lives of women with, or at risk of, gynaecological cancers.

The inquiry recognised the wisdom of this unified call and framed a recommendation in accordance with this. The need for a powerful voice to help in the consolidation, coordination and enhancement of gynaecological cancer awareness and services is given due importance in the title of the committee's report, *Breaking the silence: a national voice for gynaecological cancers*. The committee commended the establishment of Cancer Australia by the Commonwealth government yet recognised that this is but an initial step in the process of improving the approach to cancer prevention and care in Australia. Under the auspices of Cancer Australia, it is recommended that a new centre be established for gynaecological cancers so as to focus issues surrounding the disease. It is clear from the inquiry that gynaecological cancer occurs in significant numbers to warrant this stand-alone body.

An equally important recommendation surrounding the issue of gynaecological cancer care is the development of a website as a hub of information for the use of any and all concerned. One of the significant factors for this being made a priority is to ensure that Australian women and their families can have access to the latest information and services with ease as well as with faith in the information provided. A website also represents a vital link for those in remote areas who have until now experienced the tyranny of distance, with sometimes unfortunate consequences. This group of Australians was particularly noted by the inquiry as being of concern. Time is such an important factor in dealing with any cancer, particularly those which have reached advanced stages before diagnosis, such as gynaecological ones.

In 2004, 1,530 Australian women died as a result of gynaecological cancer. It is projected that this number will increase in coming years. Advances in screening and treatment are needed to halt this increase, as are wider health support programs. Given the breadth of the cancer problem and the extreme diversity of forms it takes, a single body overseeing gynaecological cancer is needed. Submissions to the committee concerning representations were overwhelmingly in favour of this distinct voice.

I wish to highlight recommendation 4 of the report, which states:

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth government provide the centre for gynaecological cancers with seed funding of \$1 million for the establishment and operational costs.

I believe this recommendation is extremely important to ensure the success of a centre for gynaecological cancers. I will take this moment to echo the comments of senators and add my sincere thanks to the committee secretariat for their work. I commend to the Senate the report *Breaking the silence: a national voice for gynaecological cancers* and its 34 very important recommendations.