

**COMMITTEES**  
**Community Affairs Committee**  
**Report Speech**

**Senator POLLEY** (Tasmania)—I too rise to speak on the report of the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs inquiry into gynaecological cancers entitled *Breaking the silence: a national voice for gynaecological cancers*. Firstly, I add my thanks to those of the speakers before me to all the people who put in submissions and to all of those who came before us at the hearings. Each one of us in the chamber, and I am sure our wider families, has unfortunately been directly affected by these types of cancers. It is still not easy for some of us, including me, on that committee to talk about those experiences.

This inquiry was a long and thorough one. The focus of the inquiry was, of course, on women, who are at risk of gynaecological cancers, and their needs. I think the scary thing that impacted on everyone involved in this inquiry is that all women are at risk. Over the years, other forms of cancers have gained a certain level of community awareness through education campaigns, diagnostic breakthroughs and a widespread realisation amongst many people today that if you feel unwell, or if there is something wrong, you should follow up with your medical professionals until you get your answers. I think that is the key message I want to leave today: do not just take what the first diagnostic expert tells you. If you still feel unwell, you have to pursue that.

It is critically important that women are listened to. Unfortunately, gynaecological cancers remain an enigma for exactly that reason. Symptoms are not generally recognisable in the early stages due to the nature of the female reproductive system. Cancers are harder to detect than something more easily recognisable to a woman, such as the symptoms of breast cancer.

In addition, the committee was told that many of the identifiable symptoms of gynaecological cancers are common and can be similar to symptoms occurring in women during their monthly menstrual cycles or may be related to other medical conditions. From the evidence presented, it was clear to members of the committee that there was a critical shortage of attention being directed at this area of women's health. The main concern voiced by witnesses to the inquiry was that the combined voice of women with concerns for their gynaecological health was often overshadowed by other cancers or not heard at all.

The Chairman of the Gynaecological Awareness Information Network, Ms Natalie Jenkins said:

A powerful voice is required to implement national campaigns and programs similar to that of the successful breast cancer movement, which has achieved a great deal for the Australian community.

I seek leave to have the rest of my speech incorporated.

Leave granted.

*The speech read as follows—*

It is for this reason that the committee's recommendations relate to the direct need for the Government to provide funding and support to establish a Centre for Gynaecological Cancers under Cancer Australia, which would provide a national

focus and coordinate existing medical, community and support services. The centre's main aim would be to educate women about the causes, symptoms, treatments and support services available relating to gynaecological cancers.

On top of this, the committee recognised the limitations of research into gynaecological cancers and recommended that the Government commit to further funding for basic research and clinical trials, as well as working with Cancer Australia to review the current levels of funding allocated for research; provide leadership in relation to the allocation of research funding and improve awareness of research being undertaken to minimise duplication of studies.

The committee also found that women with gynaecological cancers are receiving varying levels of care and treatment due to several factors including:

Inadequate levels of Commonwealth, State and Territory funding

The differences in services through public and private treatment centres and funding channels

Cultural differences and language barriers in seeking treatment, and

Geographical location.

Of these factors, the most challenging appears to be the problems women in rural, regional or remote areas are faced with relating to gynaecological cancer and other serious health issues. This is not something that is specific to these types of cancers. Unfortunately it is a well known fact that women in some geographical areas face significant and unacceptable delays when it comes to diagnosis, treatment and referral to specialists, relating to any medical condition.

Director of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and Director of Outreach Services at Cairns Bass Hospital, Dr Paul Howat put it this way, and I quote:

"Gynaecological oncology is very much a private practice sub-speciality. This means that rich white women, not surprisingly, have the best outcomes in the world for treatment of their malignancies."

Blunt yes. But unfortunately, it is very much a true statement. And that is why the majority of the committee's recommendations relate to the need to raise, not only awareness amongst ALL Australian women of the prevalence of gynaecological cancers, but also for all levels of Government to work together to provide high quality treatment and health support programs for women effected.

The inquiry found that headway is also needed to improve the general level of awareness amongst medical professionals and the delivery of gynaecological oncology education on a continuing basis.

The lack of knowledge we have about gynaecological cancers means tackling the problem is a huge challenge for all Australians.

At the moment, the cause is ambiguous and research must continue and be a priority. But with no known prevention, our focus must also be on raising awareness, not only for Australian women, but for their spouses, their families and their friends.

We must work on providing high quality treatment and support services for women effected and aim to turn around the alarming statistics associated with gynaecological cancers.

Finally I would like to thank my colleagues on the Committee and acknowledge the enormous amount of work that has gone into this report. Although I normally don't like to nominate any one person to mention I must thank Senator Ferris for her contribution. Again I join with my Committee members in thanking the Secretariat.

I urge the Government to act on this important report and I commend all our recommendations.