



Information on the Independent Breast Cancer Review

For more information or to register to share information relevant to the review please ring 8161 8276.

Is there a breast cancer risk at the WCH?

Last year concerns were raised by a staff member about a perceived high rate of breast cancer among staff who work or have worked in the Queen Victoria Building (QVB) of the Women's and Children's Hospital (WCH) which is part of the Children, Youth and Women's Health Service (CYWHS).

To find out more about this, the CYWHS commissioned an independent expert to conduct a review into the rates of cancer in female staff in the WCH. Professor David Roder, Head of Research and Information Science at the Cancer Council South Australia conducted the review of all female staff who worked at the WCH during the eight year period from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2007. This included Spotless contract staff and volunteers.

Professor Roder had assistance from an Advisory Group for this review which included Hospital staff, epidemiologists and union representatives.

What has happened since last year?

Professor Roder has continued his review and we have kept staff up to date on it's progress

Professor Roder reviewed the data which was provided to him in the following way:

Step 1: Names and dates of birth of staff members and volunteers were sent by the WCH to the SA Cancer Registry at the Epidemiology Branch of the Department of Health. Password protection and additional steps were taken to preserve confidentiality. Each staff member and volunteer was given a unique number which was also sent to the SA Cancer Registry.

Step 2: If a link was found between names and birth dates on cancer records at the SA Cancer Registry, the cancer data was downloaded using only the unique numbers (but without names and dates of birth). This was then forwarded for statistical analysis to Professor Roder.

Step 3: The WCH sent the same unique numbers and work records (also without names) directly to Professor Roder, who merged work records with the cancer data using these unique numbers.



Step 4: Numbers of breast cancers detected were compared with the numbers expected from normal breast cancer rates in SA. Any unusual cancer pattern by workplace or work history was identified.

Step 5: The cell types and other microscopic characteristics of breast cancers found were also compared with those normally found in SA, to detect any unusual features.

The original information provided to SA Cancer Registry was then destroyed.

After completing his review of the data Professor Roder provided some preliminary findings to the Advisory Group on Tuesday 27 May 2008.

What did Professor Roder's review find?

These are only preliminary findings and more work is being done to verify them.

Professor Roder found that there is no increased incidence of breast cancer for women working in the majority of the hospital. However an elevation in risk did take place for women working in the QVB in the eight year period reviewed from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2007.

There have been nine more cases of breast cancer over the eight year period for women working in the QVB than we would expect to see in a workforce of this size.

He also found that this elevation in breast cancer risk was unexpectedly accompanied by a decreased risk for other types of cancers among women at the QVB over the same period of time. There were eight fewer cancers than expected for other types of cancer.

Professor Roder believes that all present indicators are that this unusual cancer pattern has been a random event. The findings show no link between breast cancer and length of service and show nothing unusual about these cancers in terms of their microscopic characteristics or the ages of the women affected.

How is CYWHS Executive approaching this?

The CYWHS Executive is taking this matter seriously. We are committed to finding out more information as quickly as possible and keeping staff, volunteers and the unions informed at every step.



What is happening next?

Professor Roder is seeking international expert opinion about the methods used for the review and whether there is any further information available before finalising his review report.

CYWHS is engaging an independent environmental auditing company to do a thorough inspection and provide a report about the environment within the QVB. This may include interviewing staff, reviewing chemicals and equipment, and taking photos and samples for analysis.

Does CYWHS guarantee my safety while I am working in the QVB?

CYWHS is committed to the health and wellbeing of all staff and volunteers. While an absolute guarantee is not possible, from the preliminary findings there is no indication at present that the building itself increases the risk of developing breast cancer.

I currently work or have worked in the QVB and I have breast cancer. What do I do now?

CYWHS are committed to supporting women who have breast cancer and have ever worked in the QVB. This includes the opportunity to:

- talk to someone about your situation. Staff are welcome to talk to staff counselling.
- give an independent interviewer more information about your experience of breast cancer which will add to the knowledge that already exists about breast cancer risks at the WCH. If you would like to register your interest please ring 8161 8276.

I currently work or have worked in the QVB. I don't have breast cancer but I do have a different sort of cancer. What do I do now?

CYWHS are committed to supporting women who have any sort of cancer and have ever worked in the QVB. This includes the opportunity to:

- talk to someone about your situation. Staff are welcome to talk to staff counselling.
- give an independent interviewer more information about your experience of having cancer which will add to the knowledge that already exists about cancer risks at the WCH. If you would like to register your interest please ring 8161 8276.



I've worked in the QVB for years but I don't have breast cancer. Am I at risk and what do I do now?

From the preliminary findings there is no indication that the building itself increases the risk of developing breast cancer.

If you are concerned please consult your general practitioner, the Cancer Council SA Helpline or our staff counselling service.

If you have information relevant to the review you are invited to make contact to share your story. To do this, ring 8161 8276.

I don't work in the QVB but I did in the past. Will I be affected?

From the preliminary findings there is no indication that the building itself increases the risk of developing breast cancer.

If you are concerned please consult your general practitioner, the Cancer Council SA Helpline or our staff counselling service.

Should I have a test for breast cancer now?

Every woman is at risk of breast cancer. The two most significant factors responsible for breast cancer are being female and getting older. Every woman should undertake general precautions with regard to breast cancer. For example, any new abnormality in the breast (ie. lump, pain, change in shape or feeling) should be reported to your general practitioner for assessment. An annual breast examination by a general practitioner or gynaecologist is recommended, and could be performed at the time of other screening investigations such as Pap smears.

From the age of 50, it is recommended that a woman have a screening mammogram every two years. Women with a family history of breast cancer should discuss their circumstances with their general practitioner. At this stage, there is nothing to suggest that women who work or have worked in the QVB should have any special investigations.

Is this cancer cluster the same as what was found at the ABC in Toowong?

The preliminary findings indicate that this is a random cluster and is quite different to what was found at the ABC.

The ABC cluster was found to have a six fold increase of breast cancers cases, with an excess mostly in females under 50 years of age. Their researchers also found an increased risk with longer employment.



The preliminary findings for the QVB have found a two fold increase with these excesses mostly in women aged between 50 and 69 years of age. The findings have also identified no increase in risk with longer employment.

Where can I find out more about this?

The CYWHS will continue to work with staff and volunteers to provide accurate and useful information about the risks of breast cancer and what can be done about those risks.

The CYWHS will continue to provide updates as relevant information becomes available.

The CYWHS also recognises that staff members may want to seek independent advice about their personal situation. We recommend that your General practitioner may be an appropriate person to provide such advice.

BreastScreen SA offers free screening mammograms for women aged 40 and over. Further information is available at www.breastscreen.sa.gov.au or 132050.

The Cancer Council SA. Information is available at www.cancersa.org.au or through the Cancer Council Helpline 131120 8.30am – 8pm Monday to Friday.