



A call to increase awareness of the subtle signs of ovarian cancer

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



A call to increase awareness of the subtle signs of ovarian cancer

Every two hours in the UK someone dies of ovarian cancer. Making sure GPs and the public know what to look for will not only ensure the early detection and treatment of this disease, but transform lives today and for generations to come. NFWI calls on WI members everywhere to help increase awareness of the subtle signs of ovarian cancer.

Proposer's position

The proposer would like the WI to raise awareness of the symptoms of ovarian cancer among women and healthcare professionals, to help ensure that women receive early treatment where necessary.

The scale of the problem

Ovarian cancer is one of the most common types of cancer in women, mainly affecting those who have been through the menopause. According to Cancer Research UK, there are around 7,400 new ovarian cancer cases in the UK each year, and 4,100 deaths.

The symptoms of ovarian cancer include: feeling constantly bloated; a swollen tummy; discomfort in your tummy or pelvic area; feeling full quickly when eating; and/or loss of appetite; and needing to pee more often than normal.

The earlier ovarian cancer is diagnosed the easier it is to treat and so public awareness and understanding of the symptoms is really important. Cancer Research UK states that when ovarian cancer is diagnosed early, nine out of ten women will survive for five years or more. This compares to less than three in 20 women when diagnosed at the latest stage.

However, because the early signs of ovarian cancer are similar to conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), and pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS), it is often not diagnosed until it has spread and a cure is not possible. Cancer Research UK explains that in England, the majority of women with a stage recorded at diagnoses are diagnosed at a late stage (either III or IV).

The current situation

One of the main challenges to ensuring that people see their GP early is that many women do not feel confident that they could spot a symptom of ovarian cancer. A survey carried out by the charity Target Ovarian Cancer in 2016, with more than 1,300 women, found that only 4% of respondents were very confident they could spot signs of ovarian cancer.

The NHS encourages people to see their GP if:

- you have been feeling bloated, particularly more than 12 times a month
- you have other symptoms of ovarian cancer that will not go away
- you have a family history of ovarian cancer and are worried you may be at a higher risk of getting it.

In England, the number of urgent referrals for suspected cancer has fallen by 60% since the Covid-19 pandemic. Target Ovarian Cancer says that many women are worried about visiting GP surgeries with symptoms for fear of overburdening the GP, or coming into contact with the virus.

Even before the pandemic, the charity says that most people with ovarian cancer were diagnosed once the disease had already spread, and so the need to raise awareness of the symptoms now is more important than ever. They have emphasised that, even during the pandemic, cancer diagnosis and treatment remains a priority.

In October 2020, NHS England and Public Health England launched the campaign 'Help Us, Help You', urging people with lasting abdominal symptoms to get checked for cancer (ovarian, kidney and bowel cancers). The TV adverts and social media posts have been encouraging those who have had the relevant symptoms for 3 weeks or more (diarrhoea, bloating or discomfort in the tummy area) to speak to their GP.

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

At local and regional levels, WI members could host educational events (virtual or face-to-face if feasible in line with government advice) or create visual educational material to highlight the symptoms of ovarian cancer to share with their communities. Members can also raise awareness about sources of further information and support to encourage people to seek advice if they have symptoms or any concerns.

Nationally, the NFWI could engage with specialist organisations that provide expert advice or support in relation to ovarian cancer to contribute to existing awareness raising initiatives.

The NFWI could also call on public health bodies to run enhanced public information campaigns focussed on the symptoms of ovarian cancer and the importance of early diagnosis.

Points to consider:

- In 1999 the NFWI passed a resolution calling for further research into a test for ovarian cancer. This resolution would therefore offer an opportunity to build on the WI's earlier work on this issue.
- This resolution focusses on the need for greater awareness of the symptoms of ovarian cancer, which is recognised as vital for improving early diagnosis.
- WI members are well-connected in their communities, and could use their existing networks to reach more people with the key messages on this issue.
- There are several organisations campaigning to raise awareness of the symptoms of ovarian cancer. How could the WI build on this and spread the word further?

Further information

NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/ovarian-cancer/>

Cancer Research UK: <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/ovarian-cancer>

Ovarian Cancer Action: <https://ovarian.org.uk>

Ovacom: <https://www.ovacome.org.uk>

Video content

This Morning, Sarah Greene Urges Everyone to Learn the Signs of Ovarian Cancer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WUkshPEiA>

Target Ovarian Cancer, Symptoms of ovarian cancer:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhmsrTzSbX8>

Public Affairs Department Contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI Public Affairs department.

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