

Investigation of possible cancer cluster at Concord Hospital

Concord Hospital and Sydney South West Area Health Service Public Health Unit are investigating a possible cluster of breast cancer in women working at the Hospital, after becoming aware that five female staff members have been diagnosed with the disease in a six-year period between 2001 and 2006.

After it became aware of the five cases in May this year, the Hospital established an Expert Panel to conduct a preliminary investigation of the cases.

This preliminary investigation has indicated that, while small, this number of cases is higher than would be expected in the limited work area in which the cases have occurred.

The purpose of the second phase of the investigation is to determine whether the cases have occurred together by chance or whether there may be another explanation.

“Under the guidance of the Expert Panel, the Area’s Public Health Unit has already interviewed the five staff members involved and has done background work to establish whether the incidence of cases is higher than would be expected over the period in question,” Concord Hospital General Manager Mr Danny O’Connor said.

“Initial advice from the panel indicates that further investigation is warranted, and today we have provided information to all staff at Concord Hospital advising them of the investigation.

“We have also asked any staff member who has been diagnosed with breast cancer between 1998 and 2007, and who was working at Concord Hospital at the time of diagnosis, to identify themselves to the Hospital,” Mr O’Connor said.

Mr O’Connor said the investigation would involve an epidemiological study to compare breast cancer rates experienced in women who work at Concord Hospital with the rate seen in NSW as a whole.

An environmental assessment of the Hospital will also be undertaken to determine whether there are any factors within the work environment that might influence the breast cancer rate in hospital staff.

Professor Bruce Armstrong, Director of Research at the Sydney Cancer Centre and a member of the Expert Panel, said that it was not yet clear whether the numbers represented a ‘cancer cluster’.

“At this stage we have no evidence that staff at Concord Hospital have an increased risk of developing breast cancer as a result of their work environment,” Professor Armstrong said.

“The purpose of this investigation is to determine if there is a higher rate of breast cancer among employees at Concord Hospital than in the general population, and if so, why,” he said.

Mr O’Connor and Professor Armstrong said this phase of the investigation could take some months to conclude and that staff and the community would be kept advised of developments.

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Speakers at Press Conference:

- Professor Bruce Armstrong, Director of Research, Sydney Cancer Centre
- Mr Danny O’Connor, General Manager, Concord Hospital
- Ms Trish Mannes, Acting Director, Public Health Unit, SSWAHS