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ENDOMETRIAL CANCER ON THE RISE AMONG OLDER SINGAPORE WOMEN

NUH doctors say key to containing the disease burden lies in greater awareness and seeking early treatment

Endometrial cancer has gone from being the eighth most common cancer to the fourth most common cancer in Singaporean women in the last 10 years.

According to the latest report from the National Registry of Diseases Office^{i,ii} – which reviews local cancer statistics every four years – the number of registered cases of endometrial cancer has risen by almost 60% between 1998 and 2008, making it the top gynaecologic cancer in Singapore.

“Fortunately, most of the patients we treat are diagnosed when the disease is still in the early stages. The good news is that with the availability of advanced treatment options, not only will the side effects of treatment for these patients be minimal, they can also look forward to an improved quality of life,” says Dr Joseph Ng, a consultant with the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, National University Hospital (NUH).

Among the 60 women who seek treatment at NUH every year, more than 90% are above the age of 40 and about 80% are diagnosed as having Stage 1 endometrial cancer.

“The symptoms of early endometrial cancer are irregular menstrual periods or vaginal bleeding after menopause. These symptoms make it easy for women to monitor themselves and seek medical attention early should these symptoms appear,” said Dr Ng.

In Singapore, the current standard of treating endometrial cancer involves removing the uterus, fallopian tubes and ovaries. This is commonly done via open laparotomy (open surgery) or laparoscopic surgery.

There is now a third option for women who need surgery - robot-assisted surgery – which combines the strengths of an open laparotomy and laparoscopic surgery.

According to Dr Ng, who is also a co-founder of GRACES@NUHⁱⁱⁱ — studies have shown that patients who have had robot-assisted cancer surgery appear to have a significantly shorter recovery period, smaller scar and lower risks of complications that result from poor surgical wound healing.

In addition to endometrial cancer surgery, robotic surgery is also performed in colorectal and urological cancers since 2008. To date, a multidisciplinary team of robotic surgeons have performed more than a hundred procedures at NUH.

Businesswoman Mdm Wong Lee Pheng, 53, was diagnosed with Stage 1 endometrial cancer and recently underwent robot-assisted surgery at NUH.

“I used to feel tired and had problems sleeping, in addition to experiencing other symptoms. At first I thought it was due to the heavy workload and lack of exercise, until I decided to see a specialist for a proper check-up.”

“My doctor offered me a few treatment options. I decided on robotic-assisted surgery as I understand that the recovery period from surgery would be faster, and I would only have a few small holes instead of a big cut across my belly. I was also told that the doctor would be able to see and work on the body parts within closer range.”

Dr Ng says that apart from being aware of the appropriate treatment options that are currently available, improving patient education about the disease may also help lighten the burden of disease.

“Most importantly, patient awareness should be consistently reinforced by primary care providers such as General Practitioners and Family Physicians,” he added.

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The National University Hospital

The NUH is a tertiary specialist hospital and major referral centre for a wide range of medical and dental specialties including Cardiology, Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Oncology, Ophthalmology, Paediatrics and Orthopaedic Surgery.

A member of the National University Health System, it is the principal teaching hospital of the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLL SoM).

With combined resources from the NUS YLL SoM and Faculty of Dentistry, the NUH is poised to meet the healthcare needs of patients, train future generations of doctors more effectively, and help develop solutions to our healthcare problems through research.

In 2007, the NUH was tasked by the Ministry of Health to develop two new national centres, the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore (NCIS) and the National

University Heart Centre, Singapore (NUHCS) to meet the growing needs for cardiac and cancer treatment. The National University Cancer Institute, Singapore (NCIS) offers a broad spectrum of cancer care and management covering both paediatric and adult cancers. The National University Heart Centre, Singapore (NUHCS) brings together cardiac specialists and experts from a multitude of medical and surgical disciplines to provide a comprehensive and holistic approach to the treatment of heart problems.

In 2004, the NUH became the first Singapore hospital to receive Joint Commission International (JCI) Accreditation, an international stamp for excellent clinical practices in patient care and safety.

For more information, please visit www.nuh.com.sg

The National University Health System (NUHS)

The National University Health System (NUHS) groups the National University Hospital (NUH), NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and NUS Faculty of Dentistry under a common governance structure to create synergies to advance health by integrating excellent clinical care, research and education.

The enhanced capabilities and capacity will enable the NUHS to deliver better patient care, train future generations of doctors more effectively and bring innovative treatments to patients through groundbreaking research.

For more information about NUHS, please visit www.nuhs.edu.sg

ⁱ 31 August 2010, Singapore Cancer Registry Interim Report – Trends in Cancer Incidence in Singapore 2004-2008, National Registry of Diseases Office

ⁱⁱ 8 May 2009, Singapore Cancer Registry Interim Report – Trends in Cancer Incidence in Singapore 2003-2007, National Registry of Diseases Office

ⁱⁱⁱ GRACES@ NUH stands for Gynaecological Robotic-Assisted Cancer and Endoscopic Surgery at NUH. It is a hospital surgical programme for gynaecologic patients which was established in 2008.