

Media Release

Wednesday 1 March, 2006

Endometriosis – the silent disease

Scientist Rachel Zillwood was 13 when she started experiencing serious abdominal pain that, for three years, was dismissed as mere 'period pain'.

She was finally diagnosed with endometriosis; a debilitating disease that affects up to 15 percent of women, but is poorly understood by both scientists and doctors.

"I'm now 24, and have lived with endometriosis for the last eleven years. In that space of time I've had seven operations to relieve my symptoms," Rachel said. "I'm lucky that for now, medication seems to keep my endometriosis under control, but there are thousands of women who aren't so lucky."

Endometriosis is one of the leading causes of infertility and pelvic pain in women over 25 years of age. It is caused by endometrial tissue growing outside the endometrium (the lining of the uterus), most commonly on the surface of the ovaries, uterus, bowel and bladder, causing pain, inflammation, scarring, and in some cases, infertility.

As the 2006 Endometriosis Awareness Week approaches, Rachel and other scientists at the Monash Institute of Medical Research (MIMR) are investigating the cause and potential treatments for endometriosis, and working with the Endometriosis Association Victoria to further understanding of the disease.

Associate Professor Peter Rogers, Director of MIMR's women's health research, said his team's world-first discovery of adult stem cells in the endometrium could hold the key to understanding the causes of endometriosis. "We believe these rare cells play a crucial role in the onset of endometriosis, as our research has shown they are responsible for the endometrium's ability to re-grow throughout a normal menstrual cycle," he said.

"Our team is also investigating angiogenesis, or blood vessel growth. We know this important process plays a role in the dramatic changes a woman's endometrium goes through each month. Blood vessel regeneration in the endometrium is thought to be a fundamental factor in the development of serious gynaecological conditions, such as endometriosis.

"We're hopeful that from our endometriosis research, potential therapies may eventually be developed," Assoc Prof Rogers said.

In the meantime, the Endometriosis Association is working with gynaecologists, scientists and support groups around the world to learn more about the disease so they can provide support and timely information for women and girls with the condition.

For now, Rachel is pain-free and lives a normal life, but as there is currently no cure for endometriosis, she knows the pain could return at any time.

"While I can't live wondering if I'm going to have another attack, it is in the back of mind. But I deliberately chose to pursue women's health research so I could continue to learn more about endometriosis. It's satisfying and even comforting to know I'm working with scientists who are among the world leaders in researching a disease that has affected my life and the lives of thousands of women around the world," said Rachel.

International Endometriosis Awareness Week runs from Monday 6 March – Sunday 12 March.

More information: Julie Jacobs, Public Relations Manager, MIMR: (03) 9594 7109 or 0408 135 256
Or Belinda Sterjovski, Endometriosis Association Victoria, (03) 9457 2933 or 0417 354 916.

Endometriosis Awareness Week Seminar

MIMR and the Endometriosis Association are hosting a free public seminar during International Endometriosis Week.

Wednesday 8 March, 7.30pm

Lecture theatre 2, Monash Medical Centre, 246 Clayton Road, Clayton

Associate Professor Peter Rogers & Dr Jane Girling from MIMR will talk about endometriosis and discuss some of the latest advances in endometriosis research.

Other speakers include a gynecologist and a other scientists working in the Centre for Women's Health Research.

More information:

Contact the Endometriosis Association Victoria on 03 9457 2933 or info@endometriosis.org.au, or visit the Association's website at www.endometriosis.org.au.
