

Media Release

Tuesday 9 May, 2006

10 May, International Lupus Day - time to reflect on a debilitating disease

Organ failure, heart disease, blood clots, continual pain, aching joints, constant tiredness and no cure in sight. Welcome to the life of a lupus sufferer.

Lupus is an autoimmune disease, where the body's immune system malfunctions and attacks its own cells. Ninety percent of lupus sufferers are women of childbearing age (15-44 years old). It is estimated there are 20,000 Australians currently suffering from the disease.

"I was diagnosed with lupus 10 years ago, but suffered with fatigue, numbness, aching joints and vagueness for many years before. In 1996 after a major incident, (a grand mal seizure), the investigation started and lupus was eventually diagnosed," said mother-of-two, Tammy Reznik.

Women with lupus can also have fertility problems and trouble carrying babies to term, something Tammy knows too much about.

"After losing a baby at 22 weeks, I learnt my particular type of lupus has a high risk of developing clots in the placenta and reduced placental function, which can seriously inhibit the growth of the baby during pregnancy," she said.

"I was fortunate enough to fall pregnant again, but was cautioned I'd be lucky to carry my baby past 28 weeks. Despite daily blood thinner injections, I gave birth to my son at 27 weeks, weighing just 722 grams. After three months in intensive care, he was finally able to come home."

"Three years later, my daughter was also born at 27 weeks. During this pregnancy, I suffered from high blood pressure, an unrelenting skin disorder and serious liver problems, as my body and the lupus tried to fight my pregnancy," Tammy said.

Despite lupus having such serious complications, very little is understood about the disease. Associate Professor Eric Morand, from the Monash Institute of Medical Research, is using his expertise in inflammatory diseases to learn more about how and why lupus attacks.

"MIMR scientists were the first to discover that Macrophage Inhibitory Factor (MIF), a protein found naturally in the body, is a powerful factor in regulating the immune systems of lupus sufferers," Assoc Prof Morand said.

"Normally, MIF plays a beneficial role in the function of our immune system, but lupus patients have much higher levels of MIF, and this is very harmful. We're now developing therapies to block MIF production, and even prevent tissue damaged caused by lupus. This research also has implications for other diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis."

"In addition to this, MIMR scientists researching pregnancy complications and miscarriages are working to better understand placental development, and how it's impaired for women with diseases such as lupus," he said.

For Tammy, the importance of further research into lupus has taken on new importance. "I am so blessed to have my two 'miracle children'. However, my daughter now has a 1-in-100 chance of developing lupus. For me, International Lupus Day is a time to stop and pray that advances in medical research continue, so my daughter doesn't have to experience what I went through," Tammy said.

More information / interview & photo opportunities

For more information, or to organise an interview with either Tammy Reznik or Assoc Prof Eric Morand, contact Julie Jacobs, Public Relations Manager, on 9594 7109 or 0408 135 256.

For more information about lupus, contact the Lupus Association on 9650 5348.



International Lupus Day Free Public Seminar

Patients with lupus and their families are invited to a free public lupus education seminar, hosted by the Monash Institute of Medical Research and the Lupus Australia Foundation:

- Wednesday 10 May, 6-8pm
- Lecture Theatre 1, Monash Medical Centre, 246 Clayton Rd, Clayton.

Come along and hear from lupus researchers, doctors, and people living with the disease. More information: the Lupus Foundation: 9650 5348.