INTRODUCTION

Ovarian cancer has the poorest survival rate of all gynaecological cancers at 43%. The rising incidence (expected to be 1640 per year by 2020) represents a growing burden for women and families in Australia. Awareness of ovarian cancer, signs and symptoms, earlier detection and timely diagnosis are critical factors in achieving best outcomes in this disease.

The National Framework for Gynaecological Cancer Control (2016) identifies as a priority, “greater awareness of symptoms of gynaecological cancer; timely investigation and referral of a woman who may have symptoms…[to] improve earlier detection, enabling more timely treatment and improving the chances of long-term survival.” McRae (2016) emphasised in a recent review article “improving outcomes for patients affected by cancer starts with undergraduate medical education curricula” and that despite “the impact of cancer in Australia being immense”, this is not “reflected in the time devoted to its teaching and learning.”

AIM

To increase the number of health care providers who recognise the risk factors and symptoms of ovarian cancer so that the disease is detected earlier. Survivors Teaching Students® (STS) brings the faces and voices of ovarian cancer survivors and caregivers into the classrooms of health professional (medical and nursing) students to teach them about women’s experiences with the disease.

METHOD

STS is an experiential learning program for medical and nursing undergraduates. ANZGOG is launching this program in Australian medical and nursing schools to target both these identified priority areas: raise awareness of ovarian cancer signs and symptoms; and enhance learning opportunities in medical curricula. Developed by the US Ovarian Cancer Research Fund Alliance (OCRFA) in 2002 (now successfully running in Canada and the UK), it takes a pedagogical approach to provide enhanced learning opportunities for students and survivors.

Volunteer survivors and caregivers work together with their Facilitators and Regional Coordinators to present to students in medical and nursing schools initially in NSW (2017–2018), then expanding to QLD, VIC, SA and WA (2018–2020). The format includes three survivors/caregivers telling their individual stories covering aspects of symptoms, diagnosis, treatment and pathway to survivorship or in some cases bereavement with opportunity for students to ask questions of the presenters.

RESULTS

Figure 1 – Program structure and presentation format

STS demonstrates benefits for both students and survivors. The international data (2015) shows an increase in students’ knowledge and awareness of ovarian cancer (medical 22%; nursing 40% improvement). Local pilot data (2017 – nursing) shows >40% shift in knowledge and awareness.

Qualitative data (survivors/presenters) indicates high levels of satisfaction, with significant benefits reported: regaining control of one’s life, sense of purpose, hope and feelings of empowerment.

“This is the perfect way to make the disease real and help me understand how my actions and words affect a patient’s journey with a difficult diagnosis.”

(Medical student)

“This telling your story can be very powerful, scary and emotional but also amazingly empowering and healing.”

(Young woman diagnosed with Stage 3c ovarian cancer)

CONCLUSION

The international STS program has demonstrated the success of this pedagogical approach to provide enhanced learning opportunities for medical and nursing students. The longevity of the program working with survivors and caregivers in this difficult disease is testimony to the passion and investment of consumers to make a difference for women in the future diagnosed with ovarian cancer.