

## Press Release

### For Immediate Release

21 January 2014

### **FIRST-EVER SYMPOSIUM ON CANCER AND SEXUALITY IN ASIA**

A diagnosis of cancer and the resulting treatment can cause many cancer patients significant psychological distress.

This can be especially so for women with gynaecological cancers, as the cancer may impact sexual function and consequently, their self-confidence. In effect, these women find themselves grappling with depression even as they struggle with the disease.

Reflecting the recognition that the disease affects different women differently, treatment that is offered is personalised, and often multimodal in nature, comprising surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy. While the treatment can be highly effective, there can be adverse side effects that may be severe, said Associate Professor Jeffrey Low, Head, Division of Gynaecologic Oncology, National University Cancer Institute, Singapore (NCIS) and Senior Consultant, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, National University Hospital (NUH). "Radiation therapy to the pelvic organs, for example, can cause side effects such as diarrhoea, urinary irritation and skin changes."

In addition to the physical impact, the patient's emotional and mental well-being is also affected. This is where additional therapy is offered in the form of psychological counselling and support, said Dr Cornelia Chee, Senior Consultant, Department of Psychological Medicine, NUH.

Both Dr Chee and Assoc Prof Low will also be addressing this topic at the Cancer & Sexuality Symposium which will take place on 22 and 23 February 2014.

The first of its kind in Asia, the symposium covers common yet crucial issues among male and female cancer patients and survivors that are often neglected in conservative Asian societies. Topics include "Understanding Body Image and Sexual Concerns after Cancer Treatment" and "Staying Sexual after Cancer – Practical Guide on Intimacy". It is held in conjunction with World Cancer Day. Day 1 of the symposium on 22 February is for the public, while the second day's sessions are meant for healthcare professionals.

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Said Dr Chee, “Cancer patients go through a whole gamut of emotions; many of them feel shocked, numb and go into a brief period of denial when they were first diagnosed with cancer. Most go through cancer treatment with some degree of anxiety, depressed feelings and emotional turmoil. After the treatment has ended, some patients would also feel an increase in anxiety. While patients’ reactions follow fairly predictable patterns, there are always differences in every individual.”

### **Half of all female patients diagnosed with gynaecological cancer also affected psychologically**

Cancers of the uterus, ovary and cervix are among the top ten cancers affecting Singapore women; about 15% of women cancer patients are diagnosed with these diseases<sup>1</sup>.

Close to 50% of women patients with gynaecological cancers have experienced some psychiatric morbidity. The most common was adjustment disorder, which affected 41% of the patients, according to a study of 311 gynaecological cancer patients admitted to the NUH from January 2010 to November 2011. Of the patients surveyed, 7% suffered major depression.

The results also showed that multiple treatment modalities, such as surgery with chemotherapy, increased a patient’s risk of developing mental disorder by four times when compared to single modality treatment.

### **Help available**

When patients with serious psychological issues are identified, they are referred to Dr Chee. Treatment consists of counselling and when necessary, medication. Added Dr Chee, “We see patients who have more difficulty than usual coping with cancer, typically because of their psychiatric conditions, coping styles, or psychosocial stressors. We also help some patients using psychotherapy to aid their adjustment to the cancer.”

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<sup>1</sup> Trends in Cancer Incidence in Singapore 2008-2012, Interim Annual Registry Report, Singapore Cancer Registry

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Dr Chee is also the Director and Senior Consultant of the WEHS, under the Department of Psychological Medicine at the NUH. WEHS sees more than 100 women cancer patients each year with psychological issues. However, only 10 to 20 of the cancer patients consult a psychiatrist as the WEHS multi-disciplinary team provides a range of services including emotional assessment, support and therapy such as hypnotherapy and relaxation techniques to help patients to cope with their psychological concerns.

And how can a woman cancer patient deal with the psychological distress herself? To “heal” herself emotional and mentally, reconnecting with her body is important, explained Dr Chee. “This is because sometimes the patient becomes detached emotionally from her body when undergoing uncomfortable and painful treatments. She needs to restore positive self-esteem by taking care of her body and returning to previous pleasurable routines.”

Added Assoc Prof Low, “Cancer detection and treatment have advanced rapidly, curing many cancer patients and in doing so, extending their lives. The next step would be to help cancer survivors attain both physical and psychological well-being, and improve their quality of life.”

Details on the Cancer & Sexuality Symposium are available at these websites - [www.ncis.com.sg](http://www.ncis.com.sg) and [www.nuhgynae.com.sg](http://www.nuhgynae.com.sg).

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### **About the National University Cancer Institute, Singapore**

The National University Cancer Institute, Singapore (NCIS) offers a broad spectrum of cancer care and management covering both paediatric and adult cancers, with expertise in prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation and palliative care. The Institute's strength lies in the multi-disciplinary approach taken to develop a comprehensive and personalised plan for each cancer patient and his or her family. NCIS draws on the expertise of its specialists in the fields of haematology-oncology, radiation oncology, gynaecologic oncology, paediatric oncology, surgical oncology, oncology nursing, oncology pharmacy, palliative care, pathology, radiology, medical specialties including gastroenterology and hepatology, infectious diseases, pulmonary and critical care, psychiatry, epidemiology and public health as well as other allied health sciences. NCIS's strength in research allows patients to access drugs and devices before they are commercially available. NCIS is also closely affiliated with the Cancer Science Institute of Singapore, National University of Singapore.

*For more information about the NCIS, please visit [www.ncis.com.sg](http://www.ncis.com.sg)*

### **About the National University Hospital**

The NUH is a tertiary hospital and major referral centre for a comprehensive range of medical, surgical and dental specialties including Cardiology, Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Oncology, Ophthalmology, Paediatrics, Orthopaedic Surgery and Hand and Reconstructive Microsurgery. The Hospital also provides organ transplant programmes for adults (in kidney, liver and pancreas) and is the only public hospital in Singapore to offer paediatric kidney and liver transplant programme.

Staffed by a team of healthcare professionals who rank among the best in the field, the NUH offers quality patient care by embracing innovations and advances in medical treatment.

In 2004, the NUH became the first Singapore hospital to receive the Joint Commission International (JCI) accreditation, an international stamp for excellent clinical practices in patient care and safety. Today, patient safety and good clinical outcomes remain the focus of the hospital as it continues to play a key role in the training of doctors, nurses and allied health professionals, and in translational research which paves the way for new cures and treatment, offering patients hope and a new lease of life.



Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine  
Faculty of Dentistry  
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A member of the National University Health System, it is the principal teaching hospital of the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and the NUS Faculty of Dentistry.

*For more information, please visit [www.nuh.com.sg](http://www.nuh.com.sg)*

### **About the National University Health System (NUHS)**

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

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

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