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the women's
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Protecting fertility for female cancer patients

The Royal Women's Hospital, in conjunction with Melbourne IVF, is leading a national trial to help protect the fertility of young women undergoing chemotherapy for Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma (NHL).

Chemotherapy used to treat this form of cancer attacks rapidly dividing cells which include the follicles (egg producing cells) in the ovaries.

The study will recruit female NHL patients, half of whom will receive a drug called goserelin which the researchers believe may protect the ovaries.

"We know this medication suppresses hormone release from the brain to the ovaries, so the ovaries go into a type of shut-down mode," said Melbourne IVF (MIVF) fertility specialist Dr Kate Stern, who is also Head of Endocrine and Metabolic Services at the Women's. "Previous studies have suggested that this makes the ovaries more resistant to the toxic effects of chemotherapy."

Dr Stern said it is important to find a way to protect the fertility of female NHL patients because the survival rate is high – up to 90 per cent – and it affects younger people. The average age of NHL patients attending the Womens' and MIVF for fertility protection is 27. "Fertility is going to be major concern for these young women, who would often want to start trying for a baby around this time.

"It is realistic for them to expect to have a long and healthy life after cancer treatment, and we want to give them the opportunity to have a family as part of that future," she said.

The randomised controlled trial, which has been initiated by the Women's and Melbourne IVF, will invite collaboration with other IVF units around Australia. It will recruit 80 female NHL patients aged from one year after their periods commence to 38 years.

The researchers will assess ovarian function in the participants at six months and three years after treatment; and the study will follow them for up to five years, looking at a range of health impacts, including pregnancy outcomes and quality of life.

MIVF and Reproductive Services at the Women's are also working to raise awareness in the health care community of the importance of fertility discussion for cancer patients. "We have found that many doctors and oncologists are just not aware of the fertility ramifications of chemotherapy. There are several options available to preserve fertility and we need to ensure that patients and doctors discuss them," Dr Stern said.

The first Australian ovarian tissue graft was performed at the Women's in 2006 for a patient who experienced premature menopause after cancer treatment. The seven patients who have undergone the grafting procedure since then have all had ovarian function successfully restored.

For more information please call:

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