New study has potential to reshape the fight against breast cancer

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A study conducted by some of the country’s leading academics has the potential to reshape the fight against breast cancer, as evidence continues to mount that long held theories about the disease may be inaccurate, according to Adelaide University Associate Professor Brendon Coventry.

According to A/Prof Coventry the study represents a unique 20-year collaboration between surgeons, immunologists, pathologists and scientists.

“For many years breast cancer has been assumed to be ‘non-immunogenic’, meaning that the disease does not trigger a response by the body’s immune system,” A/Prof Coventry said.

However the ongoing study, led by A/Prof Coventry from the University of Adelaide, suggests otherwise.

Professor Coventry will present the findings of the study at the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) Annual Scientific Conference this week in Perth.

The study compared the tissue of women suffering from breast cancer with those who did not.

It showed that the immune response appeared to be activated in some breast cancer patients where a noticeably higher count of specific white blood cells was present when compared with normal breast tissues.

“While breast cancer research is ongoing, the findings are significant.

“These findings indicate that the immune response appears to be already occurring in many women with breast cancer, and that the strength of that response correlates with longer-term survival,” A/Prof Coventry said.

“The study and others of its kind, offer renewed hope to breast cancer sufferers and their families.

“They pave the way for continued research into enhanced treatments of the disease, including immunotherapy, a form of treatment that has long been successful in the management of other forms of cancer.

“This opens the way for therapies that can boost the on-going immune response occurring in women with breast cancers, and is reinforced by new findings using immunotherapies therapies, such as an anti-PD1 and vaccine therapies, for breast and other cancers.

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“It may even then be possible to switch ‘on’ the immune response in women with breast cancer to transform a weak immune response into a more effective one for clinical benefit, like we have shown with melanoma and other cancers,” A/Prof Coventry said.

Over a thousand surgeons from the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons as well as international surgeons from the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh are gathering at the Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre this week for a series of workshops, discussions, Plenaries and masterclasses across a broad range of surgical issues.

The conference brings together some of the country’s leading medical and surgical minds and also pays tribute to the centenary of Gallipoli, by analysing ethics and developments in surgery over the past 100 years, in war and peace time, as well as exploring what the future may hold in surgical progress.