Breast cancer among Indigenous women

Thursday 7 May, 2015

Surgeons are meeting in Perth today to discuss the prevalence of breast cancer among Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Maori women, and how to address the issue.

The session chaired by Indigenous surgeon Kelvin Kong and Maori general surgeon Maxine Ronald is part of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons Annual Scientific Congress being held this week in Perth.

Despite Australian Indigenous women having a lower incidence of breast cancer than non-Indigenous women, they have significantly higher mortality rates and worse cancer outcomes.

They are also less likely to enrol in breast screening, present with more advanced tumours, and are more likely to have mastectomies than breast conserving surgery.

In New Zealand, Maori women also have higher mortality rates than non-Maori women, and present with tumours that are significantly more advanced.

Dr Ronald says barriers to care in both countries include differences in perceptions of health, language barriers, racism, and geographical distances.

“During the session we’ll discuss why Indigenous women are less likely to participate in screening, have longer waiting times before they are seen, and tend to present with more advanced breast cancer,” Dr Ronald said.

“We’ll also discuss differences in tumour biology, and radiological differences.

“Racism may be overt but it can also be very subtle. Medical professionals need to be conscious of the types of behaviour that women find discriminatory.

"While we need to consider how to address practical barriers to accessing health care such as geographical distance, availability of screening and follow-up services, we also need to make these services more culturally acceptable and accepting of Indigenous people and their needs.

“Breast cancer, if detected and treated early, is a potentially curable disease and if we are serious about improving Indigenous health it is imperative we investigate and address the issues prohibiting women from adequately accessing, and optimally utilising cancer services.

“Indigenous Australians and Maori deserve the same access to care as other Australians and New Zealanders.”

For interviews, please contact Dr Maxine Ronald on 0432 069 556.