MEDIA RELEASE

ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN
COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

Early treatment vital in head and neck cancer

Tuesday 9 May, 2017

Delays in treating certain types of cancers are proving costly, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) has heard today at its Annual Scientific Congress (ASC) in Adelaide.

Dr Stephanie Flukes, an Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgical Trainee based in Perth, presented the findings of a retrospective study she conducted, which examined the treatment of head and neck cancers over an eighteen month period.

The purpose of the study was to examine the performance of her hospital against national and international guidelines, and if necessary, identify strategies to improve response times.

Dr Flukes said the need for early detection and treatment was particularly important in cases of head and neck cancer, which occur in a functionally and aesthetically difficult region of the body to treat.

“Head and neck cancers are biologically aggressive due to their rapid doubling times, and the demographics have changed in recent years so we are seeing a lot more younger patients.”

“From the data we were able to see that a number of the cancers progressed during the audit period where treatment was delayed.

“This has a snowball effect not only to the health, emotional and financial costs of the patients, but it is also adds significantly to institutional costs.”

The data showed that the wait times at her institution were higher than the national average.

Based on her findings the hospital was able to analyse its current procedures, and develop strategies for improvement.

“Obviously resourcing constraints are always going to be one of the main reasons why waits occur. However, the earlier you are able to initiate treatment the much more significant the savings will be in the long-term,” Dr Flukes said.

“Based on the findings of the study we were able to identify a range of strategies for how we might be able to reduce wait times and better mitigate the risks posed by head and neck cancer.

“This included improvements to our own internal processes as well as clearer communication with patients about the importance of not delaying treatment.”

Despite being able to occur anywhere in the region of the head and neck, these types of cancers are grouped together as ‘head and neck cancer’ based on the similar manner in which they are treated.

Associated risk factors include alcohol and tobacco, while some cancers are also related to the human papilloma virus. According to the latest data from Cancer Australia almost 5000 new cases of head and neck cancer will be detected in 2017.

Of this number males were almost three-times more likely to contract head and neck cancer than females. Quitting smoking and reducing alcohol consumption are often cited as preventative measures individuals can take to reduce their risk of head and neck cancer.

Media inquiries: Mark Morgan, Policy and Communications Officer
(08) 8219 0922 or 0488 218 009