

Fighting back at the forgotten killer of women

The family of a much-loved lawyer is pushing for more and better research into ovarian cancer, writes **Claire Smith**

PARLIAMENT Hall is normally a sober place – where Edinburgh lawyers, wearing wigs and black coats, pace back and forth earnestly discussing points of law.

But on one special evening this month, the great panelled hall was the setting for an evening of music and dancing in honour of a young solicitor who died at the age of 28.

Advocate Juliette Casey organised the event in memory of her youngest sister Emer, whose death from ovarian cancer sparked a drive for new research into the disease.

The event is the latest fund-raiser organised by the Casey family – who are determined to improve the survival chances of women suffering from ovarian cancer. Around 6,000 women in the UK develop ovarian cancer each year, and there are around 4,000 deaths.

Although the disease responds well to treatment if caught early, it is difficult to detect, and like most sufferers, Emer had no idea she was seriously ill until it was too late.

“She seemed fit and healthy,” says her sister. “The Christmas before she was ill I remember we went running together.”

Emer saw a doctor in February 2006, complaining of discomfort in her abdomen. A biopsy revealed she had malignant cancer.

In March, she had a hysterectomy to try to stop the disease spreading, but the cancer had spread to her liver and lungs.

As Emer’s condition worsened, each of her four older sisters helped nurse her at home in Youghal, County Cork, but there was little to be done and she died the following June.

The family was in shock. Juliette says: “One of the problems with ovarian cancer is that it is often detected at stage four – and that is when it is too late.”

Emer’s mother, also Juliette, finds it hard

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Professor John O’Leary

to understand how such a thing could happen to her much-loved youngest daughter.

“She was one of the nicest people you could ever meet,” she says. “Everybody who ever met Emer remembered her. She was full of fun and mischief. Always having a laugh and full of good humour.”

With the help of Emer’s employers, Matheson Ormsby Prentice, the family decided to set up a foundation in her memory.

The entire family, apart from new mother Ruth – another sister who set up their website turned out for the Puccini Evening organised by Juliette and held at Parliament Hall on 14 June.

The Advocates Choir joined members of the Scottish Chamber Orches-



tra for an evening of Puccini, with food and wine supplied by Valvona & Crolla.

Also in Edinburgh to lend his support was John O'Leary, professor of pathology at Trinity College Dublin, who has become the medical spokesman for the charity.

O'Leary has put together the Discovery Consortium, a network of academics which is dedicated to reducing the disease's mortality rate. Earlier this month, the Emer Casey foundation handed Trinity College 160,000 euros to establish two PhD studentships.

One of the new students will look at new ways to detect the disease in its early stages, the other at improving treatment.

"I never met Emer Casey," says O'Leary. "But the family deserve to be lauded for what they have done. They realised there was a dearth of knowledge about treatment, diagnosis and living with ovarian cancer.

"It is, in many ways, the forgotten cancer. Unfortunately, as many as 75 per cent of women diagnosed are already at an advanced stage. Fifty per cent of women will not respond to chemotherapy, and of these 10 per cent will become chemo-resistant."

Nonetheless, Prof O'Leary says progress is being made in detection and treatment, and in particular, on finding biomarkers that can identify different stages of the disease. "Ovarian cancer is a nasty diagnosis. The message is that, while the disease is devastating, by working together and through further research we can make it less devastating."

John Smyth, professor of medical oncology at Edinburgh University believes the detection difficulty is a real challenge. "Unfortunately, ovarian cancer tends to be asymptomatic," he says. "The ovaries can double in size and you don't feel an awful of difference. In about three-quarters of cases it has spread beyond the ovaries before it is detected. If you catch the cancer early and it is confined to the ovaries, you have a good chance."

Smyth says while the disease was found in younger women, it is most common in those in their fifties, sixties or seventies.

"The most common symptoms are a swelling of the abdomen – but there are lots of reasons for that in women of that age."

The professor says knowledge is increasing all the time: "There is a lot of very good research going on to try and find screening techniques," he says. "We can grow ovarian

cancer cells in the laboratory giving us a lot of scope, and meaning we can understand the disease better."

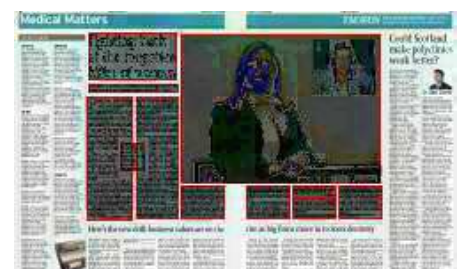
One promising current area of research is the use of hormonal treatments, and in some

cases genetic screening can be used to assess risk of the disease. Family history and presence of a particular gene can make a woman's risk as high as 50 per cent – in which case removing the ovaries is the best treatment.

Emer Casey's family are optimistic that research will soon make a real difference.

Her mother says: "Nothing can bring back Emer, but we hope this work will mean another family will be spared what we have experienced."

● www.emercaseyfoundation.com
www.ovarian.org.uk





Juliette Casey's Puccini evening was in memory of her sister, Emer, inset, who died of ovarian cancer at 28

Picture: Ian Rutherford

