

Failure to diagnose cancer often caused by delayed testing

Written by Australian Business

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Some types of cancer are very aggressive and spread quickly. With these types of cancer, if a physician fails to diagnose the cancer at the first symptoms, there may be fewer treatment options and a poor prognosis. Ovarian cancer is one of these.

Researchers at the University of California Davis Medical Center analyzed diagnostic records of women with ovarian cancer, localized breast cancer and similarly aged women without cancer. They found that the women with ovarian cancer were at least twice as likely to consult a physician with abdominal swelling or pelvic pain. Women with ovarian cancer often complained of the symptoms 9 - 12 months before receiving a diagnosis.

Approximately, 40 percent of the women with ovarian cancer had been to see a physician more than once for abdominal or pelvic complaints months prior to their diagnosis. Only 25 percent had diagnostic pelvic imaging tests. Most had diagnostic gastrointestinal studies, which are less helpful in reaching a correct diagnosis.

The researcher's findings suggest that "ovarian cancer could be diagnosed earlier in some patients whose diagnosis is currently delayed by at least four months because physicians order abdominal imaging or perform gastrointestinal procedures before they order a test more likely to diagnose ovarian cancer, such as pelvic imaging and/or CA125." California award for reduced life expectancy

A recent case provides a concrete example that ties in with the findings. A 52-year-old California woman went to the ER at a local hospital complaining of abdominal pain. She had a CT scan that showed enlarged ovaries and a lymph node. The radiologist saw an enlarged lymph node, but saw no evidence of appendicitis. He prepared a report stating that a tumor could not be ruled out and suggested follow up in two months. The report never made it to the ER Physician or the woman's primary care physician.

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Three months later, the woman saw her primary care physician with similar complaints. A CT scan completed the next month showed further enlargement of her ovaries and multiple lymph nodes and her CA-125 level was 4181. She received a diagnosis of ovarian cancer, had surgery the following day and commenced chemotherapy. Her ovarian cancer was resistant to treatment and her life expectancy was less than one year.

She argued that the failure to diagnose was caused by the hospital failing to follow accepted standards of care. An ultrasound and CA-125 ordered at the first visit would have discovered the disease. Medical experts opined that if she had been diagnosed at the first visit her life expectancy would have been closer to five years.

The measure of damages was the additional years that she could have lived and worked. She received an award against the hospital for compensation to pay for lost wages and noneconomic damages such as pain and suffering.

If a delayed diagnosis of cancer affected your prognosis or that of a loved one, consult a medical malpractice attorney. Remedies could be available depending on your individual circumstances.