

## Herald Sun

EDITORIAL

## Local hope in cancer trials

**I**t can often be a covert killer, a cancer that quietly takes hold with little in the way of obvious symptoms.

But ovarian cancer – as the most lethal cancer for Australian females – is another of those terrible diseases that can creep up on a woman, often in the prime of life or motherhood.

While it is not the most prevalent, as a malignant tumour that can be hard to detect early, it presents as a big challenge – with a five-year survival rate of just 48 per cent, compared with the five-year survival rate of breast cancer at 92 per cent.

In 2023, about 1786 new cases of ovarian cancer were diagnosed; there were 1050 deaths in Australia and, on current projections, it is estimated females have a one in 148 (or 0.68 per cent) risk of dying from the disease by the age of 85.

But, as has so often been the case in medical research and advances in cancer management, a new treatment is being developed in Melbourne that holds real hope for the future.

As revealed in today's Herald Sun, the first clinical trials of what is hoped to be a groundbreaking treatment for ovarian cancer developed in Victoria are set to begin in February or March next year – with about 30 patients in Australia to be part of the first phase of the study.

Private biotech company Cartherics this week reports on a positive meeting with the United States Food and Drug Administration as part of its final preparations for formal application to start human studies of its unique therapy drug.

Called CTH-401, it is a natural killer (NK) cell product designed to seek out and destroy the cells that cause ovarian cancer.

Using the NK therapy, some 95 per cent of ovarian cancers would be targeted because all have the TAG-72 cancer cell that the product is designed to neutralise.

The NK cells used in the treatment are sourced from stem cells taken from donated babies' cord blood. The cells are seen as nature's building blocks that can be utilised to help produce any other type of cell in the body.

Cartherics' chief executive is renowned Melbourne IVF pioneer Professor Alan Trounson, whose work has already made such a transformative difference in lives through assisted fertility treatments.

As a world-leading expert in stem cell research, Prof Trounson is now looking to break new ground in the fight against ovarian cancer.

"We know we have patients waiting in Melbourne and Sydney who want to be on the trial. We need to find out how well it works. Let's hope it works for them," Prof Trounson said.

"If this therapy works, we can manufacture the product very easily ... because it is cloned from one single cell checked for genetic normality, so there are very few risk elements."

Responsible for two world-first technologies in IVF and part of the team that saw Australia's first IVF birth in 1980, Prof Trounson was awarded the Order of Australia in 2021 for "distinguished service to medical science, and to in vitro fertilisation and stem cell technologies."

Cartherics, based in Notting Hill near Clayton in Victoria, works to develop precisely-defined immunotherapy treatments to combat a variety of cancers using gene editing technology.

It is the rapidly advancing frontier of medical science that holds so much hope for lifesaving or life-extending treatments and, perhaps one day, a cure for a range of cancers.

That such work is being undertaken, and exciting advances are being made in Melbourne is another example of Victoria's status in medical and life sciences.