



FOR PROFESSIONALS
SINCE 1941

PREVENTATIVE CANCER SURGERY IN THE SPOTLIGHT

20 April 2015: Hollywood actress and United Nations ambassador Angelina Jolie recently announced that she underwent surgery to remove her ovaries and fallopian tubes, due to her high risk of developing cancer. As Jolie carries a mutation of the BRCA1 gene, which provides her with a 50% risk of developing ovarian cancer, the surgery was done as a preventative measure.

According to Dr Dominique Stott, Executive: Medical Standards and Services at PPS, many female celebrities, such as Giuliana Rancic, Kylie Minogue, Christina Applegate and Sheryl Crow, have raised the profile on the fight against breast cancer in recent years. “Early detection and preventative steps, such as the surgery that Jolie had performed, can be the key to fighting the disease. In addition, regular check-ups are crucial for woman over the age of 50 and those with a family history of cancer.”

Dr Stott points out that a bilateral mastectomy can be considered curative for breast cancer. “However, it is important to remember that although breast cancer is the second most common cancer diagnosed amongst South African women, only about 5% of breast cancers are directly linked to genetic mutation, such as the BRCA1 or 2 genes. Sometimes, however, these genes can lead to increased risk for ovarian cancer so careful monitoring is essential.

The very early stage of a cancer is diagnosed as stage 0 cancer while it is still localised to a specific group of cells, explains Dr Stott. “In stage 0 cancer the abnormal cells lie above the boundary of invasion. Due to the advances in diagnostic techniques becoming increasingly available, increased numbers of cancers are diagnosed at this stage, which is good for the patient as the prognosis is excellent.”

When it comes to stage 0 breast cancer diagnoses, there are considerable numbers of mastectomies carried out and it has become good medical practice to remove the breast tissue when this is diagnosed in more than one site. “Although medical guidelines change from time to time, based on current research outcomes this approach is largely favoured for this type of cancer.”

Dr Stott says that while all the risk factors for developing breast cancer have not been formally identified, there are certain factors that may increase the likelihood of contracting the disease. “The possibility of developing breast cancer increases as a woman gets older, especially after the age of 55 if there is a family history of the disease, they have already had breast cancer in one breast or they have dense breast tissue.”

She adds that a woman’s risk of breast cancer approximately doubles if she has a first degree relative (mother, sister or daughter) who has been diagnosed with it.

It is becoming increasingly important for South African women to not only go for regular checkups from a young age, but to also protect themselves and their dependents from financial difficulties in the event of contracting breast cancer, says Dr Stott. "This is particularly important where a dread disease benefit pays out for the mastectomy as preventative surgery. Having a mastectomy is major surgery and has a considerable recuperation time which is even more relevant for the self-employed woman."

She adds that women are becoming more financially independent and are increasingly emerging as the main breadwinner in some households. "As a result, it is imperative these women have their own set of medical benefits in place, especially if they have dependents they care for. Therefore it is important that proper cover is in place, such as a dread disease policy that can really help to lessen the impact on the overall lifestyle changes of the policyholder and family members"

For the majority of those who develop breast cancer, early detection and preventative surgery is critical in order to treat the disease, concludes Dr Stott.