

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

Media Contact: Morgan Lyons
(214) 648-3404
or E-Mail: mlyons@mednet.swmed.edu

UT SOUTHWESTERN SEARCHING FOR DALLAS COUNTY BREAST CANCER PATIENTS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT DISEASE

DALLAS — February 29, 1996 — More than 2,000 Dallas County women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in the next two years, and researchers at UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas would like to contact as many of them as possible.

Their objective is to learn more about the disease and how breast cancer genes move through generations of families.

The researchers already have created the UT Southwestern Familial Breast Cancer Registry to compile information and materials on women with a probable risk of hereditary breast cancer. The registry, directed by Dr. Gail Tomlinson, assistant professor of pediatrics, is a database of participants in various research studies involving genetics and cancer. More than 400 families currently are enrolled in the registry's Familial Breast Cancer Study.

Of the women Tomlinson and her colleagues hope to contact, about 200 would likely qualify for enrollment in the registry. "While fewer than 10 percent of all breast cancer cases are hereditary," Tomlinson said, "a better understanding of them may help us develop new diagnostic tools to assess the risk of developing breast cancer and perhaps offer guidance in creating more effective forms of treatment."

Researchers at UT Southwestern and around the world have been engaged in a race to identify the genes responsible for familial breast cancer. To date, scientists have identified two genes, BRCA 1 and BRCA 2, which are thought to be responsible for most cases of inherited breast cancer. Researchers still do not know what alters BRCA 1 and BRCA 2, causing them to go from cancer suppressors to cancer-causing genes.

"Studies like ours may help answer some of those questions and lead us to the point where we can develop comprehensive genetic testing and counseling programs for individuals and families who want it," Tomlinson said.

Some of the women participating in the countywide survey may qualify to participate in two other breast cancer studies getting under way at UT Southwestern. Tomlinson and psychology instructor Dr. Debra Phelan-McAuliffe are beginning a study on the

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psychological impact of knowing one's genetic status and risk of developing breast cancer. Dr. John Coscia, assistant professor of radiology and holder of the Robert B. and Virginia Payne Professorship in Oncology, is starting a study comparing the relative values of different types of breast imaging in women at high risk of breast cancer.

Knowing more about familial cancer also benefits women with sporadic, or noninherited, forms of breast cancer. Geneticist Dr. Anne Bowcock, UT Southwestern associate professor of pediatrics, has used some of the information from registry families for her research on BRCA 1 and BRCA 2.

"As we clarify the role genetics plays in breast cancer, we can focus on environmental and physiological causes of breast cancer," Tomlinson said.

American women face a 1-in-8 risk of developing breast cancer in their lifetime. The risk could be as high as 85 percent for women carrying a mutated form of a gene involved in breast cancer.

Tomlinson said participation in the survey is free and takes only a few minutes. The first stage involves completing a brief questionnaire covering personal and family health. In the second stage, some women — particularly those with a family history of breast or ovarian cancer — would be asked to come to UT Southwestern to complete a more detailed personal and family medical history. In the third stage, many of those women would be followed during the course of the study as they are treated by their own physician.

Although the survey is limited to women from Dallas County, Tomlinson and her colleagues are seeking support for a larger project that would cover nearly 20 counties in North Texas.

"This study is another example of UT Southwestern's interaction with physicians in the community and their patients," said Dr. John Minna, professor of internal medicine and pharmacology and director of the Nancy B. and Jake L. Hamon Center for Therapeutic Oncology Research. Minna also is director of the W. A. "Tex" and Deborah Moncrief Jr. Center for Cancer Genetics, holder of the Sarah M. and Charles E. Seay Distinguished Chair in Cancer Research, and holder of the Lisa K. Simmons Distinguished Chair in Comprehensive Oncology.

Call 648-8539 for more information about participating in the UT Southwestern Familial Breast Cancer Registry.

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