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Breast cancer discovery heralds diagnosis hope

Nick Miller

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MELBOURNE researchers have found a surprise new culprit behind some of the most dangerous forms of breast cancer — a discovery that has overturned previous assumptions and paves the way for new treatments and tests for the disease.

The breakthrough research came from the study of a unique collection of breast cancer tissue donated by Australian women.

It is expected to benefit women from families that are particularly prone to the disease, as well those who get the “basal” form of the cancer, which is particularly aggressive and the least responsive to current treatments.

A team led by associate professors Jane Visvader and Geoff Lindeman, from the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, made the discovery, which was published this morning in the international journal *Nature Medicine*.

They investigated samples donated through the research network kConFab, by women who have had breast surgery to fight or avoid cancer.

The samples were mostly from the 10 per cent of women who have genetically inherited a much higher risk of breast cancer. Those with the “BRCA1 mutation” have a 65 per cent chance of developing breast cancer in their lifetime.

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The researchers were searching for the original cells that malfunction to begin the spread of cancer. But when team members Elgene Lim and Francois Vaillant identified the culprit it was not what they expected.

“It has been suspected for several years that the breast stem cell might be the culprit for BRCA1 and basal cancers,” Dr Visvader said. “Our research has shown it’s not the stem cell. The primary cell that has gone awry is the ductal progenitor cell.” These cells go on to form the lining of the breast’s ducts.

In the donated tissue, the cell population was much bigger than expected, and they were growing in the absence of normal growth factors. “They had changed,” Dr Visvader said.

A genetic analysis showed a strong link between the tell-tale signatures of these aberrant cells, and the genetic signature of hereditary breast cancer and also basal-type cancer.

About one-in-five breast cancers are basal-type, which are more aggressive and have very few therapies apart from radical surgery and chemotherapy. For example, the new drug herceptin does not seem to be effective against it.

“This (new discovery) places us in a strong position to identify potential drug targets that could be useful for prevention and treatment,” Dr Visvader said.

Dr Lindeman said there were already known markers for the ductal progenitor cells that could be used to diagnose basal-like tumours and help select the best therapy earlier for women with breast cancer.

“I imagine in the near future this is going to make the pathologists’ lives easier,” he said. It could also help spot problems in breast tissue before a tumour started to develop.

He said that breast cancer used to be thought of as a single disease, but was now better understood as a collection of similar cancers, each with a different underlying cause.

He said his team wanted to thank the women who had donated their tissue to kConFab, and helped the researchers make the discovery.

“Without them, this would not have been possible,” he said.

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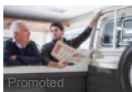
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