In the news

BETTER PROSPECTS FOR BRCA?

Women with inherited mutations in *BRCA1* or *BRCA2* are at a significantly increased risk of developing breast or ovarian cancer. However, cancers with these mutations seem to have an Achilles heel — an increased sensitivity to inhibitors of the enzyme poly(ADP-ribose) polymerase. Recent data from trials involving one of these inhibitors, olaparib, indicate that this drug can suppress the growth of advanced breast and ovarian tumours for several months. "This is the first time that we have been able to take the genetic reason a person has cancer and target it," said Dr Susan Domchek, who was involved in one of the two studies published in *The Lancet* (*CTV*, 6 July 2010).

Andrew Tutt, who was involved in both studies, was equally upbeat "It was remarkable to see that olaparib benefited women with advanced breast and ovarian cancer who had already been treated with several different chemotherapy drugs." (*The Independent*, 6 July 2010).

However, Steven Narod, Director of the Familial Breast Cancer Research Unit, Toronto, Canada, was less enthusiastic, indicating that the improvements in life expectancy offered by this drug were "pretty skimpy" but added that "I really think and I'm excited at the possibility that this drug would be useful for [cancer] prevention … the most chances of killing the cells is when the cancers are really small." (*CTV*, 6 July 2010).

These results also hold promise for men with inherited mutations in *BRCA2* as they have a 1 in 15 chance of developing breast cancer by the age of 70 according to a recent study published in the *Journal of Medical Genetics*. Moreover, women with breast or ovarian cancers that have spontaneous mutations in either *BRCA1* or *BRCA2* might also benefit.

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