

Lethal legacy for baby boom kids

A campaigner tells **Gill Vowles** a drug prescribed to pregnant women generations ago can carry serious health risks for offspring.

A HEALTH campaigner wants Tasmania to introduce an awareness week to inform daughters of women who used the anti-miscarriage drug DES they need extra health checks.

Carol Devine, founder of DES Action Australia, successfully lobbied the NSW Government to introduce an awareness week 11 years ago.

Now Mrs Devine wants other states, including Tasmania, to hold similar awareness weeks.

"There is very little information about DES provided to the community and that is leaving victims out on a limb," Mrs Devine said.

The drug diethylstilboestrol (DES) was widely prescribed in Australia from 1938 to 1971 and it is conservatively estimated there are now 72,000 DES mothers, daughters and sons.

Mrs Devine said daughters of women who took the drug were at risk of developing a rare form of vaginal cancer and had an increased risk of breast cancer.

"DES sons can have low sperm counts, undescended testicles and possibly an increased risk of testicular cancer," she said.

Mrs Devine said, despite her years of campaigning, the Federal Government had reiterated in February it would not change its policy on public awareness campaigns.

"Their policy is that it is not appropriate for information on DES to be given to participants in the breast cancer and cervical screening programs as it could create unnecessary anxieties for women who may not know if they have been exposed to DES.

"I was also told that, because DES is no longer available in Australia, it is not the role of the Therapeutic Goods Administration to provide information about DES or to promote public health messages to DES-exposed women."

A spokesman for the Tasmanian Department of Health said DES was a federal issue and was handled nationally by the Department of Health and Ageing.

Mrs Devine said DES daughters, now aged between 38 and 71, needed to have annual DES specific pelvic exams yet many had never heard of DES or the potential health problems it could create.

Hobart DES daughter Ceri Flowers, 44, said most of the women in her age group still had no knowledge of the drug and its potentially lethal legacies.

Mrs Flowers only found out about DES when she was diagnosed with the extremely rare vaginal cancer, clear cell adenocarcinoma, at age 21.

She faced radical surgery, a long recovery and a battle to find infor-



SURGERY: Ceri Flowers, whose mother was given the anti-miscarriage drug DES when she was pregnant. Ms Flowers was diagnosed with a rare cancer when she was 21. Picture: NIKKI DAVIS-JONES

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mation about the drug which had cost her so much.

"I believe a lot of Tasmanian women have been exposed to DES and don't have a clue," she said.

"An old-time Hobart pharmacist told me the drug was prescribed all the time for many uses, including the suppression of lactation, in the 1950s and '60s.

"It is important women know about DES so they can access proper health checks.

"It is particularly important at this time because many DES daughters are now moving into another high-risk bracket as menopause approaches and decisions

have to be made about hormone replacement therapy."

Mrs Devine said health professionals did not yet know if the third generation will be affected.

"Early monitoring of DES granddaughters overseas has found they are slower to begin menstruation so that indicates there may be future problems for another generation.

"We have to stop pretending this issue doesn't exist."

More information
desnsw.blogspot.com or
www.health.nsw.gov.au/topics/index.asp

The only blood to flow was Turnbull's

GLENN MILNE



WHEN it came to Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull's self-inflicted wounds of the past week, it was one of former prime minister John Howard's former advisers who offered up the analogy of the hunter and the fox.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd being the fox.

The way hunters normally proceed, said the former adviser, is that they approach the thicket where the fox is hiding and send in the faithful hound. What follows is an almighty racket as fur and flesh fly.

But the experienced hunter does not move, he waits patiently for the fox to stick its head out and then "boom!", he pulls the trigger.

"Malcolm," the former adviser drily observed, "dispensed with the hound and went into the bushes himself."

What we now know is it's not the fox that's emerged ripped and wounded but Turnbull, the putative hunter. It's been a bloody mess for the Liberals, almost literally.

Whichever way you look at it Turnbull, the political neophyte, was done over by a superior Labor machine which proved itself ruthless in its pursuit of an opposition leader it now judges has fatal character flaws.

Those flaws do not relate to Turnbull's morals as an opposition leader but to his failed instincts, which Rudd and his lieutenants will hammer from now until election day.

Turnbull dramatically overreached in immediately demanding both Rudd and Treasurer Wayne Swan resign on the back of Treasury official Godwin Grech's testimony to a Senate committee.

Neither former prime minister John Howard nor former treasurer Peter Costello, say Turnbull's Liberal critics, would have gone so far so quickly with the resignations call. With their experience they would have realised this had to be a calibrated and cautious attack.

Nor would they have got their hands personally as dirty as Turnbull did. They would have kept at arm's length from the dealings with Grech. Unstated but assumed in this critique is that Turnbull has only been in the Parliament for five years — a point often forgotten.

So Turnbull has been damaged. But you've got to hand it to him, at week's end he was still punching on the issue that was completely obliterated by the fake email story — the question of whether car salesman John Grant had received special treatment from Swan as a result of Rudd's association with Grant.

There's no doubt he did. And in any other context Swan would probably have gone for misleading Parliament. This would have been a potential killer blow to the Government. It was that close.

But in the end it was Rudd's utter determination to skewer Turnbull on the fake email that saw him prevail. Rudd stayed relentlessly on message and capitalised on every opportunity.

By contrast, Turnbull often strayed off-message.

MEDICAL ALERT

- Diethylstilboestrol (DES) is a synthetic form of the hormone oestrogen given to women to prevent miscarriage between 1938 and 1971.
- Other therapeutic uses were suppression of lactation and post-menopause syndrome.
- DES was later used as a growth promoter in chicken, sheep and cattle.
- DES was never patented and was manufactured and marketed by many companies under more than 200 different brand names.
- Everyone who was exposed to DES needs special medical care even if they don't have any obvious health problems.