



Dear Friends,

Each September during National Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month, I feel pride for our mission at Penn Medicine's Ovarian Cancer Research Center (OCRC). We take this month to honor the courage of those affected by ovarian cancer and renew our commitment to fighting this illness that has taken the lives of far too many. We also recommit to improving and promoting early cancer detection, investing our resources in life-saving research, and ensuring everybody has access to the care they need and deserve.

You are an important part of our community. Together, patients, families, physicians, researchers and so many others are catalyzing promising research to improve people's lives – including advances from the OCRC highlighted in this issue.

Karen's story shows an all too common experience for ovarian cancer patients — with an often dizzying path to diagnosis — and is a powerful reminder for self-advocacy.

As a community, we are working towards better treatment options, with breakthrough discoveries on the horizon, and cures within reach.

Wishing you a safe, reflective season,

Ronny Drapkin, MD, PhD
Director, Penn Medicine's Ovarian Cancer Research Center

[Help Fund Early Detection Today!](#)



Karen with her grandchildren, Sabrina 7, Oliver 3 weeks, and Emmie 5

"Dr. Ko and Dr. Ford are kind, compassionate physicians. They treated me like a partner in my healthcare plan. They gave me the reassurances I needed to know that I could survive this."

- Karen Smallen

Karen Smallen enjoys a good vacation as much as the rest of us. However, her digestive issues can often make the act of travel a little uncomfortable.

So in the summer of 2019, during a few weeks of busy travel to Maine, visiting family in upstate New York, and a long-awaited trip to Scotland, Karen wasn't surprised when she started to feel unwell. She thought when she was home and settled, her stomach would follow suit.

When she returned home, she experienced some familiar aches — but also noticed a bloating that was new and persistent. In the days that followed, Karen couldn't ignore the feeling that it was something more serious.

Luckily, she followed her intuition. After another follow-up appointment with her primary care physician, her nurse practitioner sent her to the emergency room recognizing that these symptoms were much more serious. From there, Karen was taken in for a CT scan which revealed a tumor. She had stage four ovarian cancer. Finally, after all the seemingly innocuous symptoms, she had her answer — and while it wasn't the one she was hoping for, she was ready to take her diagnosis head-on. [READ MORE>](#)

Direct from the Source: OCRC Investigator Updates

Powell Lab

Tumors are not simply clones of cancer cells. In fact, it is more accurate to think of tumors as abnormal organs composed of multiple cell types and extracellular supportive materials. The composition of the tumor microenvironment can have a huge impact on how well tumors respond to therapy. In fact, ovarian cancers have a tumor microenvironment that typically suppresses the ability of the immune system to effectively attack the tumor cells. [READ MORE>](#)



Daniel J. Powell Jr., PhD

Simpkins Lab

Resistance to chemotherapy is a major challenge in ovarian cancer. Most patients that initially respond to platinum-based chemotherapy will ultimately recur and will often become resistant to chemotherapy. A major focus of the Simpkins lab is to tackle the problem of drug resistance by using unique animal models that mimic the behavior of human tumors. [READ MORE>](#)



Fiona Simpkins, MD

Would you like to learn more about ovarian cancer research, share your story, or get involved? Reach out to Maddie Hansen at madd@upenn.edu

Penn Medicine Development and Alumni Relations
3535 Market Street | Suite 750 | Philadelphia, PA 19104 | madd@upenn.edu