

“Don’t be shy – get help”

By [Liz Watkins](#)

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CANCER is cancer wherever it is in the body. And for women it is often "down there" or "below the belt".

In reality, this could mean cancer of the womb, the ovaries, the cervix or the vulva.

Sadly, in many cases women find these "no go" areas too much of an embarrassment to go to the doctor and discuss personal sexual matters.

Others fear being labelled as neurotic, a hypochondriac and a time waster.

But now women are being urged to cast aside their shyness and go straight to their GP or well woman clinic to report any gynaecological symptoms. It could help save their lives.

Retired schoolteacher Sandra Woodward has good reason to warn women of a delay in diagnosis and she has been spreading the message almost single-handedly across Herefordshire.

She had a variety of symptoms, including constipation, abdominal pain and swelling - all of which were treated separately.

But she said it took 15 visits to her GP and hospital over three years before was correctly diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

Sandra has been through the mill since that news in 2002, undergoing surgery and all the consequences of intensive chemotherapy, including four-hour trips to Cheltenham for treatment.

At one time, she was given just six months to live but happily, she is now in remission.

"I was absolutely horrified how little I knew about ovarian cancer and how little the medical profession appeared to know.



Claire Silcox, fitness instructor (left), Penny Southwood, community partnerships manager, and Sandra Woodward spread the message. 063822-1.

"Once I was diagnosed, everything fell into place and I received excellent and speedy treatment," she said.

Two years ago Sandra, who lives just over the Herefordshire border at Clungunford, launched her crusade to raise awareness of the condition.

She produced a leaflet of symptoms now pinned up in many GP surgeries in the county and became an active member of several ovarian cancer charities.

Readers may not be familiar with her name but she is doing as much as anybody to alert people to the risks of cancer, promoting the interests of Herefordshire patients having to travel to Cheltenham and seeking improved treatment facilities locally.

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She has become involved in local NHS bodies and patient groups, is deputy chair of the Hereford Users Group and is on the board of governors of Gloucester Foundation Hospital NHS trust.

She travels many miles to spread the word, even presenting a paper of Herefordshire's "misery miles" situation at a conference in Paris, attended by high-profile cancer experts from a wide field.

Recently, at a Cancer Network development meeting at Heathrow, she tackled Professor Mike Richards, a government cancer director, on the travel problems in Herefordshire, seeking his opinion on the acceptability of seriously ill people having to travel so far for radiotherapy treatment.

Sandra went through a bad spell last Christmas but, since January, has been back campaigning strongly again for a better deal for Herefordshire people.

"I am alive and I am doing this for all the other women who did not make it. I met two women who had been wrongly diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome and died," she added.

"I was lucky and however soppy it may sound, I feel I have been spared for a reason."

Sandra admits to being angry at her own late diagnosis and does not want it to happen to others.

Recently, when The Venus Appeal decided to launch a national gynaecological cancer awareness week urging women to be "aware of what's down there", Sandra quickly took on the responsibility for Herefordshire.

She persuaded the Halo group to let her use Hereford Leisure Centre to promote it and was given great help by staff. She took posters and leaflets to hairdressers, beauty salons and other centres of interest to women.

"The earlier a cancer is found, the easier it is to treat," is her message - and she hopes women in Herefordshire who have any doubts about the lower part of their body will forget about embarrassment and get advice immediately.