



# Breast cancer fight turns personal for researcher

By Natasha Rudra

The pink and blue Art Deco bracelet around Adriana Vanden Heuvel's wrist is a tribute to courage in the face of a terrible disease.

The bracelet and a similar necklace belong to her mother-in-law, Jill Gore, who died of breast cancer earlier this year.

But it also represents the people sprinkled throughout her family tree who have fought cancer and lost.

She points them out in photographs – a close cousin, a grandmother, an aunt.

Dr Vanden Heuvel, a senior research analyst at the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, is speaking out about her personal experience with the disease which took so many women in her family.

She helped write the institute's latest report into the disease, *Breast Cancer in Australia 2009*.

Dr Vanden Heuvel said her contribution to the report was inspired by her beloved mother-in-law.

"How can this report make a difference? How can we make this meet the needs of people that are making decisions about what we do?" she said.

In Australia, 35 women a day are diagnosed with breast cancer and seven women die every day of the disease.

The institute projects that 37 women a day will be diagnosed in 2009.

The work was so important to Mrs Gore that a question on the breast cancer report were her last words to Dr Vanden Heuvel.

"She was in bed, in extreme pain, and knowing she's going to die from breast cancer.

She asked me how my job was going, she was so interested in me working on breast cancer," Dr Vanden Heuvel recalled.

Then there was her cousin Barb Swart, born just 22 days before Dr Vanden Heuvel. Barb's family were the Vanden Heuvels' only relatives in Canada and the two cousins grew up together. "There was a real closeness in age and a real relationship as we grew up as small children. And she was then diagnosed with breast cancer and found the treatments very, very difficult."

Aged just 46, Ms Swart died of breast cancer in 2007.

After her cousin's death, Dr Vanden Heuvel began taking her mammograms much more seriously.

With such a high risk of cancer in her family, she takes a two-pronged approach to protecting her health.

"The two strategies I'm taking are getting the mammograms regularly and the second thing is living a healthy lifestyle because physical activity is a big part of general health but also in helping to prevent the risk of breast cancer," she said.

The rest is a waiting game.

Dr Vanden Heuvel's grandmother, grandfather and uncle all died of cancer.

She never met her grandmother because of the disease.

But Dr Vanden Heuvel wants to share her story, stand up and say, "Breast cancer is a huge part of my life.

"I haven't had it but it's really personal for me, it's a big risk factor for me, it's something



**MEMORIES:** Adriana Vanden Heuvel with photos of relatives lost to breast cancer