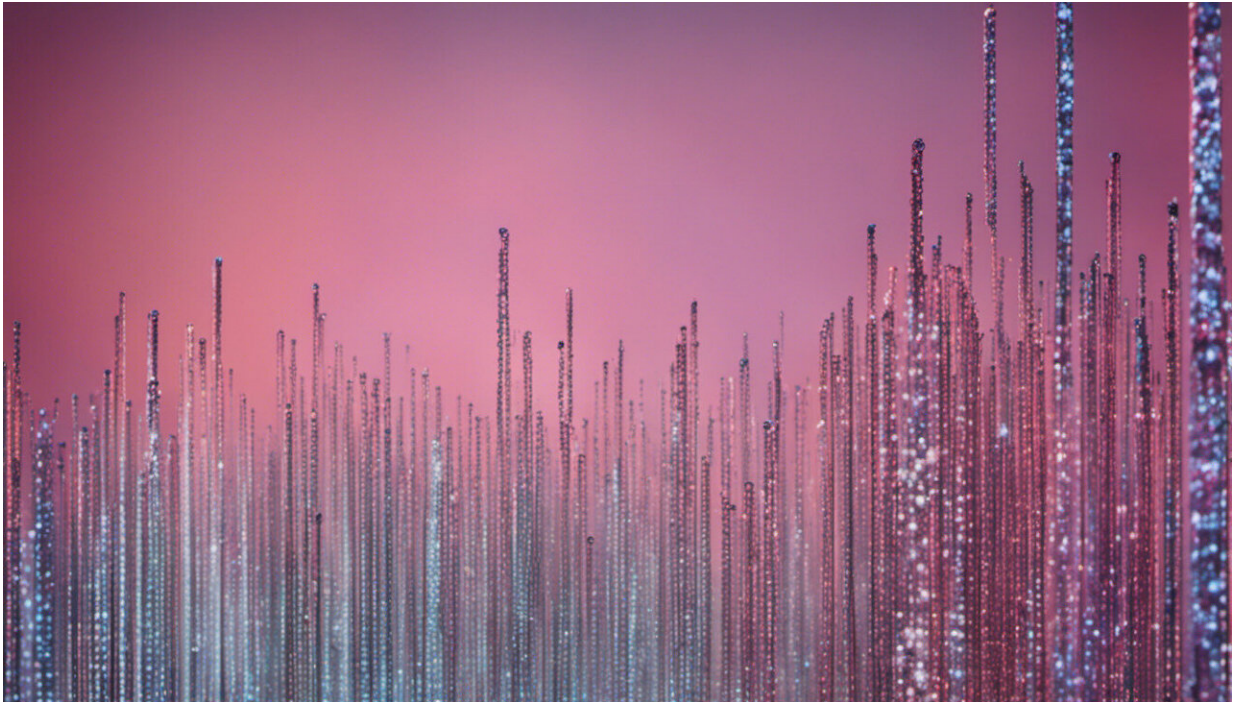


Genetics testing clinic swamped from the 'Angelina Jolie effect'

September 14 2016, by Samille Mitchell, Sciencenetwork Wa



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When Angelina Jolie had a double mastectomy in May 2013 to reduce her chances of contracting breast cancer, news headlines screamed of the move and the world gasped in shock.

Through [genetic testing](#), the high-profile actress and humanitarian was

diagnosed with an 87 per cent risk of contracting breast cancer, and a 50 per cent risk of ovarian cancer.

She elected to have her breasts and ovaries removed, and told the world through a New York Times article, in which she wrote: "Cancer is still a word that strikes fear into people's hearts, producing a deep sense of powerlessness".

"But today it is possible to find out through a blood test whether you are highly susceptible to breast and [ovarian cancer](#), and then take action," the article wrote.

While lauded for her bravery to take action and speak out to warn others, the move sparked an avalanche of enquiries from other women wanting to be genetically tested for their likelihood of contracting cancer.

Across the world in Perth, the Familial Cancer Program (FCP) at Genetic Services of Western Australia (GSWA) was inundated with referrals and inquiries.

GSWA staff investigated this flood of enquiries and in a recent paper attributed it to what is known globally as the 'Angelina Jolie effect', in which women around the world sought out genetic testing services after hearing about Ms Jolie's plight.

The study found GSWA went from an average of 71 referrals a month for its services in 2012, the year before Ms Jolie's surgery, to 215 in the month of Ms Jolie's announcement.

Referrals continued with an average of 181 a month until the end of 2013 and about 125 referrals a month in 2014.

GSWA associate genetics counsellor Rebecca Freeman says hundreds of

people, many with no family history of breast cancer, began requesting assessment thereby pushing out waiting times by months.

The avalanche of enquiries forced the centre to revise its referral policy and enact work practice changes, while also highlighting the need to better educate the public and referring doctors about familial gene testing.

"Overall Angelina Jolie's announcement was really positive and hugely brave—it really shone the limelight on familial cancer," Ms Freeman says.

"But the reverse of that was that we just weren't ready for it. And it highlighted the lack of awareness around cancer genetics and the need to educate professionals and the public."

Miss Freeman says anyone worried about their risk of cancer should schedule an appointment with their GP.

She says genetic testing is only recommended for those with a diagnosis or [family history](#) of [breast cancer](#) who fulfill certain criteria.

This article first appeared on [ScienceNetwork Western Australia](#) a science news website based at Scitech.

Provided by Science Network WA

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