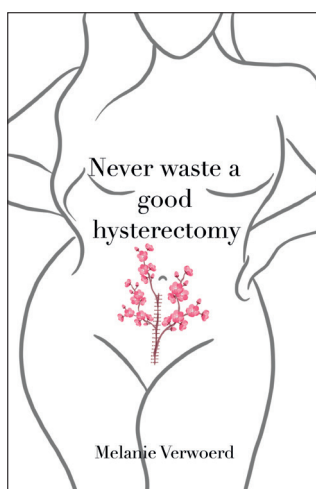


# Never waste a good *hysterectomy*

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

Melanie Verwoerd's radical hysterectomy sparked a 366-day journey of self-discovery. It helped her find her voice.



growth is malignant or benign is to surgically remove it so pathologists can look at it,' she says. 'And, because they don't want to do another surgery if the growth is indeed malignant, they will almost always do a pre-emptive radical hysterectomy.'

A date was set and the surgeons cut into

The energy in the room changed.' What started as a friendly conversation with her gynaecologist during an ultrasound turned serious when Melanie Verwoerd's doctor discovered a growth on her ovary. In her book *Never Waste a Good Hysterectomy*, Melanie says she felt like she was standing in front of a dam wall, watching cracks start to form.

Melanie's is a name that's familiar to most South Africans. In the 1990s, she and her then-husband Wilhelm Verwoerd, the grandson of former South African prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd, the 'architect of apartheid', made headlines when they joined the ANC. Melanie became the youngest woman ANC MP, and served in the first democratic parliament under then-president Nelson Mandela.

Two children later, Melanie was appointed as the South African ambassador to Ireland. The couple would divorce as Melanie ended her term as ambassador, before she moved on to become the head of UNICEF Ireland. She has since moved back to Cape Town, and works as a political analyst.

Although her life still largely revolves around politics, last year Melanie had a crash course in a completely different subject: gynaecological cancers. 'They are silent,' she says. 'Women's organs are too polite. They move out of the way to accommodate the cancer – as if it were a pregnancy.' By the time symptoms arise, it's often too late. She spent two weeks undergoing tests and consultations before she was told her only option was a radical hysterectomy. 'The only way to determine whether the

Melanie's abdomen to remove her ovaries, uterus, cervix and some ligaments, leaving her with a bright-red scar and a photo of her removed 'parts'. There, on one of her ovaries, was a growth the size of a credit card.

The doctors had assured her that it was almost certainly cancerous: only 3–4% of these types of growths are benign. But Melanie's was one of the rare exceptions: her tumour was benign. She should have felt relief; at least she didn't have to worry about radiation or chemo. Instead, the diagnosis magnified her sense of loss.

Told by her doctor that she would be back on her feet in three weeks and fully recovered in six, Melanie was utterly unprepared for the eight to nine months it actually took. 'Women who have had vaginal or laparoscopic hysterectomies

heal much faster, but I was really surprised at how long it took me to fully recover.' She found herself dependent on others for the most basic of tasks. The physical healing process, however, opened the door to emotional introspection.

'During all this personal growth and healing, I realised how little support there was for women,' Melanie says. She was furious to see the lack of information and attention hysterectomies and ovarian cancer receive. Hysterectomies are a common surgery; in fact, they've been around since the Middle Ages. One in five women will have a hysterectomy by the age of 55. One-and-a-half million hysterectomies are done in the EU alone every year, and 600 000 in the US. Yet, globally, every year prostate cancer gets two-and-a-half times more funding for research than ovarian cancer.

'If they had just had a simple non-invasive blood test, like they do for prostate cancer, I wouldn't have needed to have a radical hysterectomy,' Melanie says. 'They would have been able to divine that this wasn't cancer and removed the ovary with the growth laparoscopically. Unsurprisingly, the five-year survival rate for ovarian cancer is around 29%, compared with over 95% in prostate cancer.'

To work through it all, Melanie turned to writing, and launched a podcast of the same name alongside her book. The podcast has had thousands of downloads. 'I've received the most beautiful emails from women who are about to go through a hysterectomy themselves. They found my podcast, and now they don't feel so alone.'

She has also used her recovery period as an opportunity for introspection. Melanie learnt to bid farewell to relationships that no



“

*I realised how little support there was for women.*



**Left:** Melanie with her late partner Gerry Ryan, Roger Moore, Dustin the Turkey and Ryan Tubridy during a fundraiser for UNICEF Ireland in 2010

way to influence people and to make change.'

One thing that needs to change, she believes, is the way

older women are treated in society. 'Older men are regarded as leaders and they hold a place of honour and respect. But as women get older, we're increasingly marginalised until we become invisible.' As a society, we're doing ourselves a massive disservice. Melanie's podcast has reinforced her belief in the power of storytelling, and she plans to share more empowering women's stories in the next season. ❖

longer serve her – and that includes those with deceased loved ones. When she lost her partner, Irish radio and television presenter Gerry Ryan, in 2010, the media made a spectacle of his death and hounded her at every turn. 'Trying to grieve in the flash-light of paparazzi was one reason I came back to South Africa,' she says. 'I'm very reluctant about being in the public domain, but I do it because I understand it's the only

older women are treated in society. 'Older men are regarded as leaders and they hold a place of honour and respect. But as women get older, we're increasingly marginalised until we become invisible.' As a society, we're doing ourselves a massive disservice.

Melanie's podcast has reinforced her belief in the power of storytelling, and she plans to share more empowering women's stories in the next season. ❖