

Cancer – Campaigns, Awareness and Education



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It may be my scepticism, cussedness or just an inquiring mind that keeps me thinking in many problems about cancer. As you will appreciate from previous editorials, I like to raise questions, and there are a lot of answers needed on this particular subject. But we at *Oncology News* seldom get feedback – your own viewpoints on the many things discussed in my editorials and other articles. Let me therefore encourage you to send these into the managing editor (Patricia McDonnell) so that we can publish them in a “Comments” column. There must be a lot of opinions about the public perception of cancer, not the least whether you think it is improving (see page 183 for more information).

Perception of cancer

Of all diseases, cancer seems to be the scourge or stigma we all would want to eliminate. It is always an emotive matter, and the public today might be as nervous about it as they have been for decades. We have to consider whether its current profile as seen through campaigns, advertisements, information on the net, interest groups on care, presence of charity shops and general awareness are having any impact. An increasing body of information is also available on the internet, couched in terms that should be easily understood by the general public. We do not know whether any assessment of this is being carried out, i.e. are matters improving with regard to prevention, early diagnosis, general awareness of advances, and the extent to which some cancer can be controlled or cured?

Campaigns

Media campaigns in the UK are numerous, using celebrities to highlight the messages, such as Bill Bailey (an English entertainer) fronting “Men United” to raise awareness of prostate cancer, a cancer on the increase as men live longer. Another promotes awareness of lung cancer (Sir Alex Ferguson), and there are many more. The hoardings emphasise that together we can conquer cancer. I have mentioned before that we ought to use the word control rather than cure when referring to cancer (1). What is most desirable is for the disease to be controlled and the patient given the best possible quality of life in the circumstances. Apart from campaigns about the setting up self-help groups, cancer care and counselling organizations (and there are very many today), the single most important message is that anyone can develop cancer. The healthiest people can succumb; everyone is

at risk and must take notice of symptoms that suggest something is wrong. Educational articles online can be useful at this stage, but campaigns rightly continue to urge people to seek advice straightaway from their doctor. Apart from a number of asymptomatic cancers, early diagnosis is crucial. But we also know from experience that there can be an attitude among some people that it is not going to affect them, and others who simply don't want to know. As with cervical cancer in the past, the most vulnerable women were the very ones that did not heed advice and go for screening. But one word of warning; however ardent these campaigns might be, too many of them might result in a more blasé attitude towards them, which would be counterproductive.

Late diagnosis

One of the most disturbing pieces of news recently has been about late diagnosis, which does indeed smack of the campaigns being less effective than desirable. CRUK (2) and other bodies have expressed concern that some 50,000 cases in the UK are being diagnosed late, resulting in many more (early) deaths than necessary. If true, this is an extraordinarily high figure – nearly half of all cancers arising per annum (!) A new approach to publicising the issue ought to be considered, but it is very difficult to imagine something that can be much more effective. If we cannot do so, then even more emphasis has to be placed on prevention in the first place, but that raises other matters.

Prevention and the ageing problem

Healthier life-styles, less obesity and banishing cigarette smoking altogether are some measures that in our modern society will undoubtedly help, as well as obvious measures of protection against known carcinogens, e.g. exposure to the sun in the case of melanoma. As we live longer, the risk of developing a cancer becomes greater, and perhaps sporadic or spontaneous tumour formation will become as evident as cancers that have some environmental cause (exposure to asbestos). There is so much we still need to learn about cancer; as new findings emerge, we might be bombarding people with too much information. Any message sent out by authorities, organizations and experts has to remain clear and easily understandable to avoid overwhelming the public with “facts”, statistics, and sometimes misguided opinions about the nature and management of cancer. ●

REFERENCES

1. Wheatley DN. *Editorial: Progress in Cancer – a disappointing performance, but a reasonable prospect?* *Oncology News* 2013;8(2):44.
2. CRUK – www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-us/cancer-news/press-release/2014-09-22-half-of-cancers-diagnosed-at-late-stage-as-report-shows-early-diagnosis-saves-lives-and-could-save