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Editor



## Cancer – a problem of too much information on the internet?

A year ago I mentioned that we might worry that people are receiving too much information about cancer via social media and campaigning [1]. For those who find it difficult, sometimes repulsive, to consider they have some pathological condition (especially cancer), this deluge of information can be stressful, probably turn some away from learning about the warning symptoms.

For those who take an interest, what should they believe? If new findings have been sufficiently argued from good research or strong circumstantial evidence presented by experts, come from reliable and respected sources, and that are not presented in unguarded terms, but take into account important compounding factors, it seems worthwhile going public. However, the interface between what the experts say and what a PR department or freelance journalist does with the information is another matter. Most information comes from organisations, charities, cancer groups and individuals, not from perusal of learned journals. Slackness in reporting, e.g. for the sake of a “good news story”, should be discouraged; but how? The more information on the media, the more tittle-tattle will appear, which will be unhelpful to the general public. Remember that unstressed happy people live longer with stronger defences (especially immunological) than stressed people.

A quick look at the web reveals a plethora of “posts” on cancer. Some are superficial, trivial and sometimes wrong; many give an unbalanced view, lacking consideration of compounding factors. The problem is to separate the “wheat from the chaff”, but the man in the street is not an expert and will find this difficult.

What is the internet currently telling us about cancer and its problems [2]. Just as there is concern over a leaked government document, we need to check the major sources of information on cancer, how authentic and reliable they are, but this requires more insight by the reader (see below). One recent report on both television and internet refers to mole counting on the right arm (is the left arm not

as good?) giving as reliable a guide to the risk of melanoma as counting them over the whole body. This may worry people, especially those exposing themselves in sunny climes. Another report relates that lemon juice might prevent breast cancer cells becoming invasive. A third considers eating red meat (particularly processed meat, e.g. hamburgers) increases the risk of colon cancer (an issue debated for decades). However, if you drink a lot of green tea your chances of developing colon cancer are lower (so what if you eat a lot of processed red meat and drink plenty green tea?!). Fertility drugs might raise the risk of cancer; some thyroid drugs may increase lung cancer; the entries go on and on. Since these reports emanate from many sources, most lacking contextual relevance, we must ask whether publicity on this scale does the general public a service.

While a lot might come under my heading of “tittle-tattle”, unfortunately some cases contain elements of truth that should make us more aware of certain dangers and therefore be prepared to look deeper into the issue. As we are living longer, the danger increases; Cancer Research UK now tells us [3] that 1 in 2 of us will develop cancer in his or her lifetime, a frightening thought to many folk.

Overload of information means that people might take less rather than more notice of cancer issues, which is why we need to educate the general public not only about the prevention and early diagnosis of cancer through reliable information, but educate them into how to judge this reliability in the first place – not an easy task. Failure to do so could have two outcomes; first, without this “training”, the dread of developing cancer becomes exacerbated, making matters worse. Second, the situation might be likened to that now confronting the use of social media, i.e. overloading starts to turn people against it. Ignoring reliable information on cancer will certainly not help early diagnosis; it is better to have some reliable information than none.

### REFERENCES

1. Wheatley DN. *Cancer – Campaigns, Awareness and Education*. *Oncology News*. 2014;9(5):151.
2. I am not referring to individual post; browse the web with search words such as Cancer Problems and you will see more than enough.
3. [www.cancerresearchuk.org](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org) – 1 in 2 people will develop cancer.

**“There is so much we still need to learn about cancer, and research does not seem to slacken pace. As new findings emerge, people are being bombarding people with too much information, which might or might not be a bad thing. However, this is a problem that now needs to be addressed”**