

Medicine for Managers

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Cancer

Cancer (malignant neoplasm) is a disease in which a group of cells displays uncontrolled growth, invasion of adjacent tissues and sometimes metastasis to distant parts of the body via the blood or lymph vessels.

It can affect any person of any age and is responsible for about 25% of deaths. In 2008, there were 157,000 cancer deaths, and the commonest tumours resulting in death were lung, 23%, bowel 10%, breast 8%, colon 6% with other tumours responsible for 53% of deaths. Cancer is caused by abnormalities in the genetic code of cells caused by carcinogens such as tobacco, or the result of errors in genetic replication. The tendency to cancer may be inherited. Cancer is classified according to the tissue from which it originates and diagnosis is usually made by removing part or all of the growth (a biopsy) and examining it under the microscope. The most common cancers affecting men are prostate, lung and colon and affecting women are breast, lung and colon.

There are a variety of treatments available aimed at removing or destroying the cancer

with minimal damage to the rest of the body. Surgery may be used to remove part or all of the tumour or the whole organ in which it is present may be excised (for example prostatectomy for prostate

cancer). Sometimes surgery is necessary to control symptoms, as for example where a tumour is causing pressure or obstruction. Many tumours are sensitive to radiation which destroys or injures cancer cells causing tumours to shrink. Radiation therapy

can be applied externally using a focused beam from a machine or internally either by implanted radioactive material or consumed orally and concentrated in a particular organ (for example radioactive iodine). Chemotherapy is treatment with cytotoxic drugs which destroy actively dividing cancer cells. Such drugs may not be cancer specific and may damage other

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actively dividing cells such as skin, hair, etc. There are also other more targeted therapies such as hormonal and antibody treatments which are very cancer-specific.

In some cases, treatment is not curative but palliative and used for symptom control only. This is usually the case where the tumour has already spread to distant parts of the body or where to treat it radically would seriously damage other vital parts of the body. It may involve all the treatments above together with the use of medication and other supportive therapies. Such treatment is aimed at improving quality of life.

The management of cancer is recognised in the QOF. Five points are available for having a register of all cancer patients (excluding simple non-melanoma skin cancers) and up to a further six points are awarded if between 40 and 90 percent plus of the patients have a review within six months of receiving confirmation of diagnosis.

Cancer is often regarded as a death sentence and yet the majority of cancers are cured and improvements in treatment are constantly occurring. Early diagnosis is vital and screening for cancer in healthy people, as in for example mammogram, may provide a key to continuing reduction in the disease.

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