

Cancer and What You Can Do about it

By

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History

Cancer is a disease as old as history. Its recognition as an entity goes back to the days of the *Vedas* and the ancient Egyptians. We find in the *Veda* a principle of treatment enunciated for one type of cancer which is used even today, in a more refined manner. In spite of its recognition as a fatal disease which had resisted all attempts at cure, it never received that degree of attention which many smaller ills did. It held the same inferior position in medical research till about a century ago when the West woke up to its ravages and made efforts to discover its nature and treatment. To-day the largest sums of money allotted for Medical Research in any country of Europe or the America are allotted for Cancer; more than has ever been spent on any other single disease! The largest Medical Research organisation that has ever been founded in the story of medicine exist for cancer to-day, and the widest publicity is given to cancer.

Nature of Cancer

What is cancer? Cancer is not an infection that we get from without. It is only an abnormal growth of certain groups of cells in the body. A cell of the organism throws away all the restraints of its social order and starts on a mad career of multiplication and infiltration, living like a parasite on its erstwhile companions. It does not serve any useful function. Locally it spreads ceaselessly, enlarging its domains and infiltrating and destroying everything it meets. It has been very rightly compared to a steam roller. As its tentacles spread out they meet lymphatic and vascular channels which they invade. Once a cancer cell gets into a lumen of

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these channels it ceases to be a local disease. It becomes a systematic one. Islands of cancer cells, carried out along the lymphatic and blood streams, settle down in the liver, lungs, bones, brain and other parts of the body and start afresh in their new territories, their own autonomous growth. They reach the most hidden recesses of the human body where no form of treatment can get at them. Here they abide, grow and kill.

Apparently excellent health does not exclude the possibility of the presence of cancer. In some instances the individual may seem healthy yet have advanced cancer. This is due to the fact that the disease has not yet involved the vital centres.

There are many kinds of cancer differing widely in their make up and behaviour. Some are external, some internal, some grow rapidly, some slowly, some spread quickly throughout the body, others do not; some are highly dangerous and others are less so. But all possess the common characteristic of disorderly growth.

Unlike other important diseases, cancer almost invariably causes the death of the patient unless it is completely removed or destroyed.

Although the nature of cancer is not at present fully understood there is a large amount of practical knowledge now available regarding its causation, its prevention and cure.

Incidence of Cancer

From available statistics it can be approximately estimated that annually

1000 people suffer from cancer out of every million of our population. Therefore if the population of our State is taken as 40 millions, it can be said that almost certainly 40 thousand cases of cancer occur in Madras every year.

It is important to bear in mind that cancer is no respecter of age. It attacks both old and young. Babies may be born with it and the elders die of it. However, cancer is largely a disease of adult life, occurring chiefly after the age of 35 years. The incidence of the disease increases as age advances.

Women are afflicted by cancer more often than men because of its frequent occurrence in the female breast and the female reproductive organs.

Cancer affects all parts of the body internal and external. The commonest forms are cancer of the mouth, stomach, rectum, breast, cervix and skin. But no part or organ of the human body is exempt from cancer.

Cause of Cancer

Where truth is not out but where men's minds are groping towards light, many theories are generally propounded. All these may not be of much interest to the lay public. But yet out of all these thought processes and study, certain factors have come to light which play a very definite part in the causation of cancer. These factors have great value because in knowing them, and protecting ourselves and our kith and kin against them, we will be in some measure preventing certain of the most common forms of cancer.

Chronic Irritation

It is now accepted by the most competent authorities that the commonest variety of mouth and skin cancer is the result of long continued irritation. Of thousand cases of oral cancers seen in the Government General Hospital, Madras, all patients

were heavy tobacco chewers addicted to this habit over decades. In the only three cases that were not tobacco chewers, there was a history of a sharp jagged tooth hurting the side of the tongue over a period ranging from 4 to 6 years. In addition everyone of these cases suffered from bad infected teeth.

It is also well known that cancer can occur on the basis of a chronic ulcer. There is a remarkable fact about penile cancer. A very large majority of penile cancers have been found in the labouring classes and they have been entirely in uncircumcised individuals, and 70 per cent of them gave a history of phimosis from childhood. In the whole of literature there is not a single case of cancer that has occurred in a circumcised individual, circumcised early in life as in the Mahommedans and the Jews. Circumcision later in life does not give this protection. It is evident from this that the irritation of accumulated dirt within a tight prepuce is the main cause of cancer in this region.

Trauma

Of all cancers, the commonest in women is that of the uterine cervix and again statistical analysis has shown that this type occurs very largely in women who have borne several children, and is invariably associated with cervical injuries. Scientifically managed deliveries, and promptly repaired cervical injuries, will definitely bring down the incidence of cervical cancer.

In bone and testicular tumours injury probably plays some role at times.

The second commonest cancer in women is that of the breast. This tumour arises most commonly at the time of the climacteric and is believed to be due to a over activity of the female hormone. A protracted menopause increases the danger of its occurrence.

Occupational Cancer

These are due to exposure to carcinogenic agents. They may be chemical or physical. Chemical agents include tar, cresote, and paraffin shale oil. Continuous exposure to heat, light or radium or deep X-ray also produces cancer.

Inhalation of radio-active dusts like those in the cobalt mines of Bavaria, result in lung cancer. 75 per cent of miners working in those mines die of this disease.

In addition to these well demonstrated causative factors, several other theories have been propounded at different times by different medical men. They include the virus theories of Rous and Guy, the Helminthic theory, and the Genetic theory of Maud Slyes. That there is a definite factor inherent in an individual's constitution which makes him more susceptible to cancer cannot be

denied. *But at the same time analysis of the family history of cancer cases shows that for all medical and scientific purposes cancer can be taken as not hereditary.*

Danger Signals

Cancer is always an emergency. The moment you, or someone you love, receives the first warning signal which may mean cancer, go to your doctor. *The thing to fear is not cancer but delay in its recognition.* If you receive one of the danger signals do not wait because you are frightened or worried. The signals may not mean cancer; *but it is promptness in receiving proper diagnosis and treatment which may save your life.*

Cancer is almost always painless in the early stages when it can be cured. Do not let yourself be misguided by a lack of pain. When pain arises it is too late.

If people are aware of these dangers and doctors wary and on the watch, cancer cure becomes quite hopeful.

The Danger Signals are :

1. A sore that does not heal within a reasonable time under ordinary care especially in the tongue, cheek, palate or lips.
2. A painless lump or thickening either in the breast or anywhere in the body.
3. Abnormal discharge or bleeding from any opening of the body viz., the anus, the womb, etc.
4. Progressive change in the colour or size of a wart or a mole.
5. Persistent indigestion which does not respond within two months to the usual methods of treatment.
6. Persistent hoarseness of voice, cough or difficulty in swallowing.
7. Change in normal bowel habits increasing constipation, persistent diarrhoea, or alternative constipation and diarrhoea.