Editorial: the cancer screening controversy
Cusumano, Pino G.; Lifrance, Eric

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Cancer screening can lead to important benefits, but it can also lead to important harms. It is generally agreed that a cancer-screening test should be offered to an entire population if the test reduces mortality due to that type of cancer. However, conclusions regarding which tests are most beneficial are often based on observational studies rather than randomized controlled trials. Although several cancer-screening strategies are currently available, new consensus statements and guidelines regarding which patients should be offered screening on a routine basis are needed. Cancer societies are changing their guidelines on cancer screening to emphasize the benefit of over-treatment. Selling screening can be done either by exaggerating the risk, either by exaggerating the benefit of screening, and avoid mentioning the potential for harm. It is especially true with cancer. Many of the messages use familial cancer, highlighting large numbers (such as 30,000 deaths) rather than the much smaller 58-year risk of dying from prostate cancer (0.1%) until the age of 70.

Several researchers, reviewing messages disseminated by government cancer registries screening programmes in seven European countries, showed that over-treatment still occurs. Three-quarters of the letters failed to quantify the benefit of screening, some mentioned the most important harm of screening, i.e., overdiagnosis: the detection of cancers never destined to cause symptoms or death.

Unfortunately, negative evidence does not make it any easier to sell screening. Informed decision-making requires credible information about the benefits and harms of screening. To understand the true effect of screening, people need the numbers. Unfortunately, there is a growing evidence that people can understand the numbers if they are presented clearly.

In understanding the limitations of screening, researchers can develop better tools. Cancer is a complex disease. Governments need to provide clear messages about cancer screening, but simple messages are not always possible, and can do a disservice to the people they serve.

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