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Major Improvements in Cancer Survival but not for Pancreatic Cancer

A new study by Macmillan shows a major improvement in cancer survival for most cancers over the past forty years. However, there has been no improvement at all for pancreatic cancer, which remains the worst performing cancer with a median survival rate well under one year.

Taking data published by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, an analysis of 20 cancers in the UK, including pancreatic cancer, was carried out to determine median survival rates from the early 1970's to 2007. Median survival is calculated as the time it takes until half of those diagnosed have died. Six cancers now have median survival times of more than ten years and some cancers such as colon cancer and non-Hodgkins Lymphoma have seen dramatic improvements.

The low median survival for pancreatic cancer is reflected in the one and five-year survival rates for this disease, which stand at 17 per cent and only 3 per cent respectively in the UK. Sadly these figures haven't changed for 40 years.

Low one year pancreatic cancer survival rates in particular are indicative of later-stage disease at diagnosis borne out by the fact that only 10 per cent of patients are diagnosed in time for surgery, currently the only potential for a cure.

Pancreatic cancer, although being the fifth biggest cancer killer in the UK, killing over 22 people per day, has been underfunded for decades and currently receives a dismal one per cent of total cancer research funding.

According to Pancreatic Cancer Action charity, as well as increasing the amount of investment into the disease, the focus needs to be on earlier diagnosis so more people can be diagnosed in time for surgery. This means there has to be a greater awareness of the signs and symptoms of the disease among both the public and medical communities.

Ali Stunt, Founder and Chief Executive of Pancreatic Cancer Action said, " Again we are seeing major improvements in survival for the majority of cancers in the UK which is fantastic news for patients. Sadly the same cannot be said for pancreatic cancer patients who are still facing a disease with the lowest survival rates in the UK. The fact that these have not improved in over forty years is frankly, appalling."

She added "The Department of Health claimed that "it is giving high priority to cancers where survival rates have not improved". Unfortunately we're not seeing evidence of that for pancreatic cancer. There needs to be a greater focus on pancreatic cancer in terms of awareness, early diagnosis and funding. It's time for change."

Pancreatic Cancer Action is a national charity which aims to raise awareness of the symptoms of pancreatic cancer amongst the general public and medical community leading to earlier diagnosis and the possibility of curative surgery.

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Notes to editors:

5-year survival is only 3%. This figure has not changed in over 40 years.

Pancreatic cancer is the 5th leading cause of cancer death in the UK

22 people a day die of pancreatic cancer in the UK¹

Relative survival to 5 years is only 3%

Relative survival to 1 year is less than 20% and one of the worst rates in Europe

82% of people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in the UK will die within a year

Only 10% of patients are eligible for potentially curative surgery due to late diagnosis²

47% of people are diagnosed as an emergency in our A&E system (NCIN, 2010)

It is the 11th most common cancer for men, and the 8th most common cancer for women.