

A brighter prognosis

Raising awareness of pancreatic cancer could secure research funding, writes Elizabeth Lynch

It is the fifth biggest cancer killer in the UK, yet pancreatic cancer gets little media coverage compared with breast, colon, prostate and lung cancers. And, unlike these cancers, the survival rates for pancreatic cancer have scarcely improved since the 1970s.

'It is a relatively rare disease that needs a specialist to look at the computerised tomography (CT) scan to determine which type of tumour is present,' says Amanda Procter, lead upper gastrointestinal (GI) clinical nurse specialist at Bradford Royal Infirmary.

'Since pancreatic cancer has few symptoms in its early stages, it is not usually picked up until patients complain of upper abdominal pains later on. Generally patients feel unwell for a few months before the symptoms present, by which time it is often very advanced.'

The pancreas is a gland approximately six inches long, lying just behind the stomach. It helps to break down food, as well as use or store the energy we get from the process.

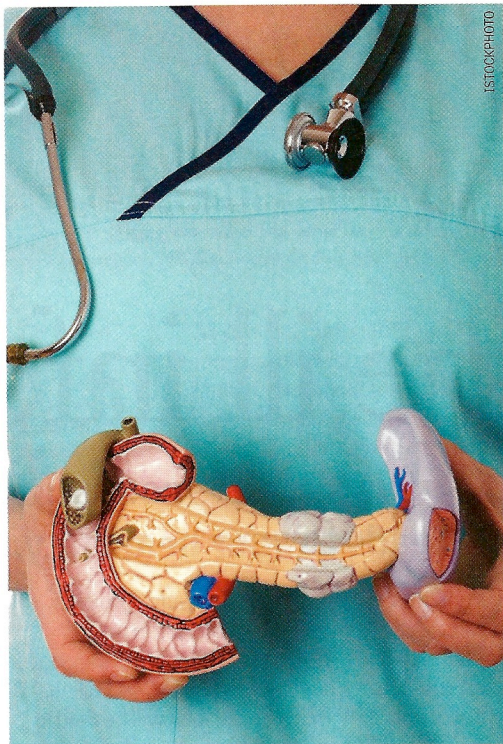
There are risk factors that can increase the likelihood of an individual getting pancreatic cancer including smoking, diabetes, older age, chronic inflammation and being overweight, as well as family history.

SUMMARY

Pancreatic cancer is difficult to diagnose early. However, small improvements in patient outcomes are beginning to be seen because of recent initiatives to streamline care.

Keywords

Pancreas • Cancer • Treatment • Awareness • Late diagnosis • Upper abdominal pain • Survival rates



The pancreas is a six-inch gland located behind the stomach

Ms Procter believes that survival rates have been slow to improve because it is a difficult cancer to catch early.

Elsbeth Cowan, lead upper GI nurse specialist at NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, says: 'Since there is a small survival rate there is no one flying the flag to raise awareness and increase funding.'

At present, less than 2 per cent of cancer research funding goes on pancreatic cancer.

However, Ms Cowan adds that small improvements of months in the lifespan of patients diagnosed with pancreatic cancer are beginning to be seen. She believes this is because more centralised, specialist teams are being established in hospitals.

Pancreatic cancer survivor and Pancreatic Cancer Action chief executive Ali Stunt says:

'We need more people to be diagnosed earlier, in time for surgery, currently the only cure.'

Between 10 and 15 per cent of patients have surgery. However, many are diagnosed too late because the cancer encasing the blood vessels around the pancreas may have spread to other organs.

Innovative approach

Chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments can be used to prolong life where an operation is not possible. Radiotherapy can damage the organs around the pancreas. However, studies are taking place where radiotherapy is used with chemotherapy to shrink the tumour before surgery, and Ms Cowan is encouraged by this approach.

Charities with an interest in pancreatic cancer are trying to raise awareness among healthcare professionals, while being careful to avoid causing public alarm.

Ms Cowan says: 'We do not want people with weight loss or lack of energy to worry, but many of the people we see have had these symptoms for three months or more. We need to increase general awareness, get earlier referrals and access more CT scans so that diagnoses are made sooner.'

Reassuring patients and providing information on where to get support and specialist palliative care services is a key role for nurses.

'The public still has a nihilistic opinion of pancreatic cancer,' says Ms Cowan. 'Yet we are seeing small improvements in life expectancy. Until this is recognised, there will be trouble improving awareness and securing funding for research' **NS**

Elizabeth Lynch is a freelance writer

Further information can be obtained from www.pancreaticcanceraction.org