

Power of Hope: Fight Cancer together

Cancer will overtake heart disease as the world's top killer by 2010, according to WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer. Rising tobacco use in developing countries will be a huge reason for the shift, particularly in China and India, where 40% of the world's smokers now live. So is better diagnosis of cancer, along with the downward trend in infectious diseases that used to be the world's leading killer. New cancer cases will likely mushroom to 27 million annually by 2030, with deaths hitting 17 million. By 2030, there could be 75 million people living with cancer around the world, a number that many healthcare systems are not equipped to handle.

In India, cancer is a silent crisis. It goes largely unreported, and elicits little of the attention it deserves from health authorities preoccupied with other pressing health problems. Efforts at prevention and early detection are extremely limited, as are diagnostic and treatment services. Cancer survival rates in India are exceptionally poor. Lack of awareness, stigma, and reliance on traditional healers mean most people do not seek medical help in time. Also, there is a common perception that cancer is transmissible, which leads to patients being shunned by family and friends and inhibits people from accessing screening or acknowledging early symptoms. More than two third of cancer patients are first seen with late stage disease, which has a poor prognosis and is long, difficult and costly to treat. The five-year survival rate for women in the USA who receive treatment early for cervical cancer is 92%, while fewer than 3 in 10 patients in Asia are alive five years after diagnosis. The death rate of women with cervical cancer in developing countries is six times more compared to that in wealthy countries.

More than half of cancer deaths are caused by tobacco use alone and another one third are related to poor nutrition, physical inactivity, overweight, obesity and other lifestyle factors. Hence, approximately 60% of cancer deaths could be prevented if we exercised more, ate healthier food, maintained a healthy body weight and got recommended cancer screenings according to a report by American Cancer Society.

Hence, there is a critical need to address and prevent the cancer epidemic from spreading. The key measures for this are:

* *Education and awareness raising* among the general public and among health professionals. The family and community have a role to play in caring for people with cancer, especially those with terminal disease, and for this they need sound knowledge and understanding of cancer as well as information about what they can do.

* *Prevention and treatment of causes.* This means, for example, including hepatitis B vaccine in the schedule of immunizations for children, and considering a vaccination programme against HPV for adolescent girls and boys. Health departments should take

steps also to encourage healthy diets and exercise, control the use of tobacco and alcohol, and protect the population from environmental pollutants.

* *Early detection.* The earlier cancer is detected, the easier and cheaper it is to treat. This relies on two things: cancer 'literacy' among the general public so that individuals seek timely treatment for signs and symptoms, and mass screening of people at risk. Screening programmes for such cancers as breast and cervix should not be prohibitively expensive.

To make this happen, concerted efforts and lobbying by health activists, patients' groups and other interested parties called "alliance of stakeholders" play an important role in stimulating political will, both at the national and international levels. Key to the success of these efforts is the ability of experts and advocates to agree on clear and effective measures to be taken. Terry Fox run organized by Terry Fox foundation, an alliance of patients' groups, public and health activists, is the ideal case in example. This event is considered the largest single-day fund-raiser for cancer research in the world. People come together as individuals, families, schoolchildren and groups to raise money in Terry Fox's name. The run is in the memory of Terry Fox who was diagnosed with bone cancer at 18, and he decided to run across the nation to generate funds for cancer research, calling his journey the "Marathon of Hope". After running 143 days and covering 5,373 km, he was forced to stop as cancer affected the lungs and he passed away on June 28, 1981. The run was first held in 1981 and since then it has been a regular event worldwide. It is held in 32 countries of world annually including in India which stands fifth in raising funds for cancer in world through this run.

We need similar alliance of stakeholders and efforts in India. Indian cancer society, through its volunteer wing called "GIVE-India", is trying to work in this direction. Its objectives are;

1. Creating awareness about cancer
2. Screening and early detection programs for cancer
3. Supporting treatment costs of poor patients with breast cancer
4. Supporting research on cancers
5. Fund raising

Give-India is spreading its wings and invites all the motivated and interested individuals to join us and contribute in any of the above mentioned initiatives. Please contact us if you would like to join us and spread the movement against cancer, the imminent threat to entire humanity.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Margaret Mead (1901 - 1978)

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