

Young women warned of lung cancer risks

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This is Dr. Anna Gavin, director of the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry at Queen's University, Belfast. Credit: Queen's University

Seventeen people are still dying from lung cancer each week in Northern Ireland despite a small improvement in survival rates for the disease.

The figures are revealed by a report launched today by the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR) at Queen's University Belfast.

The NICR is holding a joint launch today with Macmillan Cancer Support which has released its own report on the experience of patients living with [lung cancer](#) and their carers in Northern Ireland, highlighting that services are not meeting their needs.

The Queen's report, entitled Monitoring care of patients with lung cancer

in Northern Ireland diagnosed 2006, details the facts of the disease from the numbers of people diagnosed, to trends, treatment and survival.

It looked at the experiences of more than 2,200 lung cancer patients over a decade and points to a fall in cases for men under 65 but not for women in this age group. Lung cancer now kills more women than [breast cancer](#) in Northern Ireland.

While highlighting the need for continued work to prevent the condition in all sections of the population by addressing smoking, it also acknowledges the commitment of staff who treat patients with the disease.

Among the Queen's University NICR report's findings were:

- Around 900 people are diagnosed with lung cancer in Northern Ireland each year
- Survival, although slightly improved, is very poor. In 1996 only 23 per cent of patients were alive one year after [diagnosis](#). By 2006 this had improved to 27 per cent
- In 2006, 81 per cent of patients had serious symptoms including coughing up blood, pain and breathlessness
- 48 per cent of patients were diagnosed with late stage disease, pointing to the need to further promote earlier diagnosis.
- One third of patients were unsuitable for any type of surgery, radiotherapy or [chemotherapy](#)

More positive aspects of the report show:

- Patients are seeking medical advice earlier and waiting less time for investigations
- There is better recording of patients performance and more use of scans
- Two thirds of patients are discussed at multidisciplinary meetings attended by a range of healthcare staff who deal with patients
- There is increased referral to respiratory physicians and palliative care and more patients having chemotherapy
- There is increased equity of service across geographical areas

Dr Anna Gavin, Director of NICR and co-author of the report, said she was concerned that lung cancer was not decreasing in younger women: "Five per cent of female lung cancer cases occurred in those under 50 compared with three per cent of male cases. In fact, lung cancer currently kills more women than breast cancer. Young women who smoke need to think about the risks to their health which may not be fully seen for 20 or 30 years.

"Lung cancer is a preventable illness and as tobacco is the main cause in the vast majority of cases we must never lose sight of the need to work to reduce the number of people who start to smoke, while encouraging those who already smoke to give up.

"The outcome of cancer is improved by multi-professional and multi-disciplinary working and it is encouraging that by 2006 two thirds of patients were discussed at team meetings within hospitals."

Her co-author, NICR statistician Dr Finian Bannon said rates were much higher in areas of Northern Ireland considered to be deprived.

"Lung cancer highlights the contribution to the health difference between the most and least affluent in our community - if the lung cancer levels in 2006 in the most deprived areas were reduced to the levels in the most affluent areas, then 40 per cent or 360 fewer people would be diagnosed annually.

"Many patients don't seek medical attention until late in their disease and treatments are then less likely to be effective. We must encourage people who have symptoms of the disease to go to their own doctor as early as possible and have these investigated.

"In many cases it will not be cancer but if it is cancer and it is detected early, treatments are more likely to lead to a cure and improved survival."

Both the NICR and Macmillan reports have outlined the need for effective communication between hospitals, GPs, patients and carers to enhance the quality of life and survival rates of patients.

The Macmillan Cancer Support study, Patients' and carers' experiences of living with lung cancer in Northern Ireland - a report, found that there are high levels of unmet need.

The report highlights the need for better information and support services for patients and carers and says that it is essential that they are better understood and given a higher priority by those involved in developing health services

Macmillan has also stressed the importance, in the light of evidence of improved survival rates, to think about the longer term needs of patients

and their carers.

Heather Monteverde, Macmillan Cancer Support's General Manager for Northern Ireland, said:

"It is encouraging that more people are surviving lung cancer longer however that means there is more need than ever to provide long term support for patients, their families and carers.

"Lung cancer is a devastating disease and, as a high priority for Macmillan, we are campaigning hard to ensure that patients have equal access to services, no matter where they live in Northern Ireland.

"We are well aware of the link between deprivation and lung cancer and we need to ensure that patients do not experience increased poverty at what is already a hugely stressful time."

Source: Queen's University Belfast

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