

UK charity: Help us analyze cancer tumors online

October 23 2012, by Maria Cheng

(AP)—A British cancer group is turning to an unorthodox source of help in an effort to speed its research: web surfers.

On Wednesday, Cancer Research U.K. is launching a website driven by crowd-sourcing, asking people to help spot trends in tumors. Ordinary citizens have already helped make important discoveries in other fields such as astronomy and archaeology.

"There are cures for cancer buried in our data," the website says. "Help us find them."

"We've broken down the data so that someone who has two to three minutes on their lunch break could go on the site and do something genuinely useful for cancer," said Chris Lintott of Oxford University, who led the team that designed the website. "If millions of people are willing to help, we could get through things a lot quicker and make a real difference to research."

The group is asking volunteers to look through tens of thousands of pictures of [breast cancer cells](#) left over from recent studies and help categorize them. If successful, experts will then include samples from patients with other types of cancer.

"This data would normally be reviewed by researchers, but they can't keep up with the volume generated, and research slows as a result," Lintott said. "We changed the language so it's less technical, but the task

is exactly the same as what a pathologist would do."

People surfing the site will be given a short tutorial on what cells to analyze and what cells to ignore. Once users are able to identify abnormally shaped cancer cells, they will be asked to determine how many have been stained yellow and how bright that yellow is, according to a guide. The yellow stains represent certain [biomarkers](#) that may help scientists predict things like patient survival or response to a drug.

That information goes back to researchers who will then look for broader trends between those cells and a patient's response to a particular treatment. Each image of a tumor will be analyzed by several people on the website to ensure that any accidental or incorrect clicks can be ignored.

Earlier this month, astronomers at Yale University announced they had discovered a planet orbiting twin suns in a four-star system with the help of volunteers.

Other scientists studying plants and animals routinely enlist the public's help to make observations and even to design proteins.

Some cancer experts welcomed the initiative.

"Engaging the public in this way could certainly prove useful," said Dr. Richard Francis, research manager at Breakthrough [Breast Cancer](#), a U.K. charity not involved in the project. "If successful, the site may help to accelerate the early stages of [cancer research](#)," he said in an email.

Others were more skeptical. "This doesn't get down to the bottom line of what makes a cancer cell a cancer cell," said Kenneth Aldape, chairman of pathology at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Texas, who had a look at the website and described it as "superficial."

"I don't think anything's going to be cured here, but it's worth a try," Aldape said. "We certainly haven't cured cancer with the methods we've used so far."

More information: www.clicktocure.net/

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