Cancer is the biggest health concern among the public, poll reveals

July 14 2024

Two-thirds of the public say they are very or somewhat worried about being told they have the disease—higher than for any other medical condition, including dementia and having a heart attack—according to
The polling, carried out among 2,000 UK adults by Public First on behalf of the University of Cambridge, highlights the concerns that people have over a cancer diagnosis. It suggests that late diagnosis—too late to treat their cancer—is the biggest concern in relation to a cancer diagnosis (70%) followed by the impact on one's family and those around them (52%).

When asked which transformative development they would like to see in the future—including eradicating diseases such as malaria, self-driving cars becoming commonplace, and genetically engineered crops enabling us to end famine—55% of respondents chose "being able to detect and treat cancer early enough so that no-one dies of the disease." Only eliminating poverty came anywhere close, with 23% of respondents.

The University of Cambridge and its partner Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (CUH) are working to build Cambridge Cancer Research Hospital, a revolutionary new type of hospital that promises to change the story of cancer.

The specialist cancer facility is bringing world-leading scientists within the walls of a new NHS hospital—for the first time—to detect cancer earlier and deliver personalized health care and precision cancer medicine to patients.

"Cancer affects one in two of us and understandably induces fear in patients and their families," said Professor Richard Gilbertson, Director of the Cancer Research UK Cambridge Center at the University and Research Lead for Cambridge Cancer Research Hospital. "People are worried that treatments won't work or that the side-effects will be terrible, but also what their diagnosis will mean to their family."
"At Cambridge we believe it's possible to imagine a world where there is no longer a fear of cancer. It's an ambitious goal that we—along with many other researchers around the world—are working hard to realize."

When asked what would concern them most about receiving a cancer diagnosis, the most commonly selected worry was that the cancer would be detected too late to treat (70%). Some 52% of respondents were concerned about the impact on their family or those around them, 41% about getting access to the right treatment, and 36% about the side-effects of treatments.

Asked what would make them less afraid of being diagnosed with cancer, 61% replied, "Knowing that the form of cancer I have is treatable." Highlighting once again the importance of early detection, over half of respondents (51%) said, "Knowing we are better at catching cancer early enough to treat."

"Outcomes can be completely transformed—better survival and less invasive treatments—if the cancer is diagnosed early enough," said Professor Rebecca Fitzgerald, Director of the Li Ka Shing Early Cancer Institute at the University of Cambridge.

"That's why a lot of our focus now is on understanding cancer at its very earliest stage—years before an individual will develop any symptoms. That way, it may even be possible to prevent the disease in the first place, or at least catch it when it can be treated easily."

Knowing that a lot of people—including organizations such as the University of Cambridge—are researching how we prevent, diagnose and treat cancer is reassuring, the poll suggests.

A third of respondents (32%) said this would make them less afraid of a cancer diagnosis. And 43% of respondents believe cancer research at
universities will have a big impact on reducing deaths from cancer (though perhaps unsurprisingly, 64% thought the biggest impact on reducing cancer deaths would come by reducing NHS waiting times).

Professor Deborah Prentice, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, said, "Cambridge is really leading the way on transforming our understanding of cancer and how we can prevent it and treat it."

"This brilliant work will save and transform lives locally, nationally, and around the world, such as being able to sequence a tumor's DNA at speed right through to developing revolutionary new cancer drugs such as olaparib. It is world-leading work which makes me extremely proud."

The public were asked their views on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to improve diagnosis and treatment of cancer. An overwhelming majority were in favor of its application, with just 8% saying we shouldn't use AI for cancer diagnosis and treatment. Some 55% thought it was acceptable to use AI to speed up research into new treatments, 47% to help a doctor diagnose their cancer and 41% to help their doctor decide which treatment would work best.

At the University of Cambridge, scientists are developing AI tools with the potential to transform cancer treatments, by speeding up diagnosis, personalizing therapy, and reducing costs.

As part of this work, researchers are using AI to predict how patients will respond to a particular treatment before they receive it, allow them to start treatment sooner, target hard-to-treat cancers, and enable screening of cancers that at the moment would otherwise be prohibitively expensive.

When presented with a number of undesirable future events, a cancer diagnosis was second only to the death of a close relative in terms of
being most worrying (64% versus 72%)—higher than nuclear war (56%), terrorism (53%) and being a victim of crime (52%).

Surprisingly, older age groups were significantly less likely to say they were "very worried" about cancer compared to younger age groups—14% of over 65s compared to 26% of 18-24 years olds and 29% of 25-34 year olds.

The University of Cambridge is launching a month-long focus on its cancer research, including a look at the new hospital, meeting researchers investigating the earliest stages of cancer, finding out how AI is helping in the fight against the disease, and meeting some of the patients who are playing a key role in groundbreaking cancer research.

More information: A copy of the full survey is available at: https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/new-polling-for-the-university-of-cambridge.html

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Cancer is the biggest health concern among the public, poll reveals (2024, July 14) retrieved 3 August 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-07-cancer-biggest-health-poll-reveals.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.