



Letter to the editor: The Pundit Speaks
By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
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"A Global Cancer Explosion"

Worldwide, cancer has long been considered a health threat in high-income countries but it is now recognized as being an important cause of morbidity and mortality in developing countries. Even though the number of annual cancer deaths remain at about half a million in the US, cancer deaths are increasing globally. In 2008, 7.6 million or 21% of non-communicable disease (NCD) deaths were caused by cancer, and this number is projected to increase by 4 million over the next 20 years. By 2030, two thirds of all cancer diagnoses will occur in low- and middle-income countries. Shockingly, according to the World Cancer Research Fund, the number of new cancer cases has increased by 20% in under a decade and now stands at 12 million a year. Back in 1998, investigators were launching an educational campaign and anticipating an expected explosion in cancer cases around the world. Then, as now, the rise in cancer deaths was attributed to an aging world population. In 1998, the World Health Organization (WHO) said that action was needed to ensure equality of cancer treatment throughout the world. Experts warned that governments would have to set priorities within their budget limits and that a quarter of all cancers could be prevented by applying knowledge existing at that time via tobacco control, infection control and promotion of healthy eating. At this point, none of these have had a major impact. Experts also estimated that half of the cancer cases could be cured within 25 years. Again, 13 years later, this has not happened and cancer deaths continue to escalate globally. Today, more than 50% of total costs of cancer treatment is spent in the 2 last weeks of life. Experts say, "That is not efficient and it is not humane. It is not beneficial for the healthy because the economy is focusing impractically on palliation or end of life, and many resources are not allocated to the early stages of the disease or at a time when the population is healthy and should be maintained as healthy as possible." It appears that shrinking government budgets will make cancer treatment primarily a question of money. According to a recent study by the American Cancer Society and the Lance Armstrong Foundation (LIVESTRONG), the global economic cost of cancer and the calculated economic impact of death and disability as a result of cancer worldwide in 2008 was US \$895 billion, representing 1.5% of the world's gross domestic product. Inevitably, politics will further intrude into the cancer treatment arena and it will not be a pretty sight.

In the America that I love, we can help by avoiding smoking, by eating a balanced nutritious diet and by exercising daily as tolerated.

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