

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Pancreatic Cancer Update”

Jeopardy host, Alex Trebek, announced his grim news saying, "Just like 50,000 other people in the US each year, I was diagnosed with stage IV pancreatic cancer. Normally the prognosis is not very encouraging," he continued, "But I am going to fight this. I plan to beat the low survival rate statistics for this disease." The cancer almost always strikes after age 45, with 71 the average age at diagnosis. Trebek is 78. Stage IV means the cancer has spread to other organs, and surgery is almost always not possible. Pancreatic cancer often spreads to the liver. While **pancreatic cancer** survival rates have been improving from decade to decade, the disease is still basically incurable. According to the American Cancer Society, for all stages of pancreatic cancer combined, the one-year relative survival rate is 20%, and the five-year rate is 7%. These low survival rates are attributable to the fact that fewer than 20% of patients' tumors are confined to the pancreas at the time of diagnosis; in most cases, the malignancy has already progressed to the point where surgical removal is impossible. The overall five-year survival rate is about 10%, although this can rise as high as 20% to 35% if the tumor is removed completely and when cancer has not spread to lymph nodes. The median survival rate of people with stage IV pancreatic cancer is about 18 months, with half surviving longer and half dying sooner. Tumor size does appear to impact survival rates. The larger the tumor, the less likely it is to be cured by resection. In patients where a cure is not possible, progression of the disease may be accompanied by progressive weakness, weight loss, and pain. Effective techniques for pain management are widely available today and used by physicians experienced in the care of pancreatic cancer patients. The techniques include nerve blocks and various drugs that can be taken by mouth or injection. There are also a variety of effective techniques available to treat bile duct obstruction, which may produce jaundice and stomach obstruction caused by growth of the tumor. Trebek's cancer is likely the type known as pancreatic ductal adenocarcinoma. The other type of pancreatic cancer is a pancreatic neuroendocrine tumor, which is what Steve Jobs had, referencing the late founder of Apple. The reality is that for most people, pancreatic cancer is too advanced to be treated with surgery and is not very responsive to currently available chemotherapy and targeted therapy medications. Experts are learning more about the genetics of the disease, and "actionable mutations" within the tumor, to get a better result.

In the America that I love, we hold out great hopes for future medical research and scientific discoveries.

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