

Public awareness is crucial for pancreatic cancer research

By Brian P. Davis

AS I SEE IT

There is a national tragedy that no one is talking about. This story does not make headlines. You will not see it on the evening news or hear about it on the radio. It is usually mentioned in the obituary section of the local newspaper. Yet its impact is felt by countless people in all 50 states. This stealth killer moves quickly and without apparent reason. Yet few take notice until it is too late.

I know this killer all too well. I was formally introduced to it on January 24, 2002. I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer that day. Little compares with receiving such grave news. I was lucky, though. My tumor was operable. Surgery provides the only hope for cure from this horrific illness, yet is possible in only 10 percent to 15 percent of pancreatic cancer cases.

The vast majority of individuals diagnosed with pancreatic cancer die within three to six months. With a mortality rate

somewhere between 96 percent and 99 percent (depending on whose statistics you believe), precious few survive this particular dance with death. This deadliest malignancy is the fourth-leading cause of cancer death in this country. In the United States this year, 31,800 will die from this disease; 850 in Massachusetts alone.

Why does pancreatic cancer continue to be such a silent killer? We have witnessed tremendous advances in some of the other leading cancer mortalities in the past 30 years. Breast cancer, for example, which had a five-year survival rate of 75 percent in 1974, is currently just under 87 percent. Prostate cancer survival moved from 67 to almost 99 percent. Pancreatic cancer, meanwhile, remains stagnant. Two things distinguish cancer of the pancreas from the other leading cancer killers. First is the general lack of awareness about the disease. Most people recognize that it is a particularly deadly illness, a virtual death sentence. Yet few could tell you where the pancreas is located (in the abdomen behind the stomach) let alone its function (it produces hormones including insulin and enzymes to aid in the digestion of food).

This lack of awareness is due in part to the absence of early-detection techniques. It is not a routine consideration in health care. Given its location, any abnormalities in the pancreas are not likely to be found during an annual physical exam. There is no accurate blood test available. It becomes a concern only when symptoms are manifest, usually too late for curative treatment. Another reason for this lack of awareness stems from the high mortality rate of pancreatic cancer. There are so few survivors that the critical mass necessary for mounting a national awareness campaign is severely lacking. It is very difficult for those who have lost loved ones to pick up the mantle and carry on this fight. Most will seek closure and healing.

Thank God that some choose to continue the battle.

The second distinctive feature of pancreatic cancer is the lack of adequate research funding. The following points are made not to pit one cancer against another or to suggest that some cancers are overfunded. Rather they illustrate two important issues. First, pancreatic cancer research is ridiculously underfunded. This is a national disgrace. Second, one sees the clear connection between National Cancer Institute funding and the progress that has been made in treating these other cancers.

The NCI, part of the federal National Institutes of Health, is the leading provider of funding for cancer research in the country. Of the five leading cancer mortalities, four received more than a quarter of a billion dollars in NCI support in fiscal 2003. Pancreatic cancer research, not surprisingly, was the exception, receiving just more than \$42 million in support. Believe it or not, these figures represent an improvement over prior funding. From fiscal 1996 through fiscal 2003, each of the other cancers received at least \$1.4 billion in support. Pancreatic cancer received \$166.9 million during this period.

So where do we go from here? First, we must raise public awareness about the horror of this disease. We must contact our congressional representatives and our U.S. senators, demanding increased support for the National Cancer Institute. We cannot stand by as budgets are level-funded or cut. Every day 1,500 people die of cancer in the United States. Cancer recently overtook heart disease as the leading cause of death of those under 85 in the United States. This is a national crisis and those making important decisions are not listening. Let's make some noise.

After confronting the personal odds which I faced some 38 months ago, I now know that anything is possible. I also know that it cannot be done alone.

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