

Commentary

Detecting cancer at primary care level in developing nations by involving youth of a country

Smile Kajal

University College of Medical Sciences, Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital, Delhi – 110095, India.

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After witnessing two cancer deaths in my family, I understood how hard is it for a family to bear the loss. So I strongly feel that a planned approach towards prevention and elimination of cancer, and especially lifestyle related cancers, is the need of the hour in developing nations where resources are limited. A large proportion of a nation's population is comprised of young adults. They can make a huge difference by adopting and propagating some simple strategies which will not only decrease the risk of development of cancer in older individuals but also in their own age group.

It has been shown that a significant number of cancer cases are preventable if we change our lifestyle habits and make healthier choices. Since most of the lifestyle choices are formed and molded during young adult years, it is important to get this message across before young people begin to pick up unhealthy habits. This is why a nation's youth is so important in the fight against cancer. We need involvement of students, because they will listen to their peers and will follow what the people in their age group do.

The roots of any developing nation lie in its villages. So any strategy or plan should begin here and proceed up to national level in a step wise approach. People in villages do not know when to report to a doctor and when not to. I remember an incident where a girl from a village was rushed to the hospital when she had her first menses. The point here is that people need to be made aware of difference between physiological processes and warning symptoms which may sometimes point towards a serious disease process like malignancy. Today's youth is very active on the internet. It has become very easy and trending to just type a symptom and search for the possible causes. Our youngsters should make appropriate use of such things and spread awareness among their friends, relatives, neighbors and other people who are still not used to the world of web. They can also organize seminars, group discussions and tell people about healthy lifestyle, risk factors, warning symptoms, etc.

But before waiting for appearance of a symptom, can't the onset of cancer be prevent? Yes, it can. The recent data shows that commonly encountered cancers like lung cancer, oral cancer, esophageal cancer, breast cancer, colon cancer are somewhere or the other related to lifestyle changes which people have adopted. There is a huge list of risk factors which promote development of cancer. Some of them include smoking, tobacco chewing, chewing betel quid, decreased consumption of dietary fibers, etc. And it is not surprising to mention that the habit of consuming such things starts in the adolescent age group. Because of this, the youth itself is at high risk of developing cancer

E-mail: smilekajal92@yahoo.com. Tel: +91 782 785 2930.

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in the future. The young generation should inculcate lifestyle modifications in its own life before propagating to others. Here comes the role of young parents. They should encourage their children for healthy food habits so that when these children become parents they can propagate the same message to the next generations.

There are individuals in society who have never smoked and still they are diagnosed with lung cancer. There are women who have never had multiple sexual partners or unsafe sex practices and still they get cervical cancer. There are people with no family history of colon or breast cancer, but still they are diagnosed with these cancers and that too at very late stage. It is very important to pick up such cases early, because these cases do not have any risk factors and hence they present clinically at end stages. To do this heroic task our youngsters can play a major role by organizing cancer screening and counseling camps. The screening methods used for most of the common cancers in developing nations are very simple and may require only a minor training for a week or two. After training, these youngsters can help greatly in increasing the detection rate of cancers. A step wise approach, starting from the villages in India, is described in the following example.

For example, youngsters who enter graduation course, no matter medical, non-medical or others, will be trained by a medical personnel in very simple methods like breast self-examination, preparing a pap smear, smearing of oral mucosal lesions, etc., on voluntary basis. They will then be divided into many groups, each comprising five or six people and each group will be allotted one colony in a locality or one nearby village. Every group will visit its respective place once a month and set-up a small camp. Ideally, at least one medical or paramedical person should be there in this group. He/she can be called from the nearby dispensary or primary health care center. The task after this is going to be the most difficult one because people usually do not show up at such camps until and unless they are told the benefits of the same. To help our youngsters in this, NGOs, which again has many young members can come forward and provide them moral as well as some financial help for printing and distributing pamphlets prior to the day of organizing camp, money for setting up camp, transport, food, etc. After all this, the group which has visited the village/colony will tell people about healthy habits and finding out people who need medical attention. The girls will teach young girls in their 20s and other ladies the correct method for breast self-examination, pap smears will be prepared by members of group for every lady who is between 21 and 65 years of age (American Cancer Society guidelines 2012), smears of visible whitish or reddish lesions on tongue or oral mucosa. The smears prepared will be sent to primary or community health centers. Subjects with warning symptoms, positive smears or lump in the breast will be advised to contact a doctor for confirmation and further evaluation.

In such way, we can help our society and can keep our youngsters socially active in real life rather than on social networking sites. If youngsters participate in such activities with full enthusiasm, the prevalence of lifestyle induced cancers will be reduced. This will also keep the youth of a country a bit busy and due to this they will not become the victims of drug abuse or victimize other of rape, murder, etc., because 'an unnecessary free mind in young age is as dangerous as a free lion in a zoo.'

Reference

American Cancer Society (2012). Guidelines of American Cancer Society for the early detection of cancer. Available at: <http://www.cancer.org>