National Cancer Control Programme: Beyond number games

Continuing the theme of number game from the previous editorial, it is time to initiate a wider discussion on the complex number game embedded in the Indian National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP). NCCP is replete with numbers: number of cancer cases, number of cancer centres, number of registries, number of machines, number of tobacco users, leading numbers, receding numbers, missing numbers, duplicate numbers, so on and so forth. Do we oncologists look at the National Cancer Control Programme beyond these numbers and in a more holistic manner? What exactly does the NCCP mean for busy trainee or practicing oncologists? I suppose for most of the oncologists, far too busy in managing patients and overwhelmed by problems in delivering optimal patient care, the national cancer control programme remains at the periphery of their cancer consciousness. For many oncologists like me, who started training in the eighties, NCCP may have crept into consciousness during those frustrating attempts to memorise the NCCP booklet for the essay paper of the MD examination. Once through the exams, NCCP often fades from consciousness, only to resurface in the consciousness of those who somehow get involved with things official such as ‘striving for Regional Cancer Centre status’, ‘Cancer Registry’, ‘Governmental Committees’ or ‘procuring Radiotherapy Equipment’. As Radiation, Clinical, Medical or Surgical Oncologists, while our hospital roles undoubtedly revolve around management of cancer patients, greater involvement on our part in the NCCP can only be in the best long term interests of our present and future generation of cancer patients. We need more visible and deeper engagement between the community of oncologists and the NCCP for fine tuning the cancer control agenda in our country? Active feedback and participation of more oncologists and pathologists in various NCCP programmes and discussion rounds can bring out more relevant issues facing the oncologists, cancer hospitals, cancer patients and the community to the fore of the NCCP agenda.

Encouraged with few initial successes and faced with more challenging and moving targets in cancer prevention and optimal care, the Indian NCCP is poised to enter into a new, more challenging and possibly more rewarding era. In decades to come, the health of the nation would become a major determinant of our human and economic wealth and the pace at which we will achieve our rightful place in the world order. Though cancer per se does not feature in the United Nations ‘Millennium Development Goal’ health agenda, WHO predicts that by the year 2020, almost 70% of the world’s 20 million cancers patients will be in the developing nations. In our march towards becoming a healthier, wealthier and pre-eminent nation, coordinated and need based research for understanding the threats to the nation from chronic diseases such as cancer and ways to counter such threats will assume increasing importance.

Your feedback and suggestions regarding effective control of cancer through the medium of this journal and other platforms is critical and much valued. In the accompanying ‘Viewpoint’ section of this issue I discuss the achievements of the NCCP and the challenges we face in dealing with such a complex enemy in an equally complex and vast country. I argue for the case and place of research in a national ‘Control’ programme for a life-style related disease, positioning research not at the forefront of NCCP but as its ‘silent engine of change’. How NCCP takes on this challenge beyond the number games will be the real test of the maturity, ingenuity and resourcefulness of the oncologists, researchers, health planners, non governmental organizations and the government. The dividends of effective cancer control are beyond numbers and even beyond ‘cancer control’.

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