

Cancer Awareness

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There is a reason, or rather many reasons, why people of some far off villages in Mizoram and around suffer and die from cancer many times more than others in rest of India. Surely it is just not an unlucky coincidence that they also indulge in rampant smoking and alcohol drinking from an early age. A deadly combination by themselves, strongly correlating with cancer almost always, along with many other things. That cancer can be caused by some cancer causing substances, called carcinogens, present in our daily life, some in our diet, some in our habits, some in our professional environment, is known for a long time. Cases of multitudes of nasty skin cancers magically vanished from London hospitals after the practice of employing young boys as chimney sweepers was stopped by law thus preventing their exposure to the harmful substances in chimney soot. Historically from cancers in chimney sweepers and mule spinners, sarcoma of bones in radium dial painters, urinary bladder cancers in aniline dye industry, liver cancers in polyvinyl industries, mesothelioma in asbestos industry to cluster of cancer villages found in West Bengal in the 1980s due to arsenic pollution to habits of chewing betel quid and gutka to infection by viruses causing uterine cervical cancer and liver cancer and tobacco to solar radiation and even biological agents like oncogenic viruses, the list of avoidable cancer causing substances is long. Much therefore in public health and medicine depends on on people becoming aware of what are undoing them and then avoiding them. That is most emphatically true in our country where nearly 40 % of cancer deaths are preventable if only people become aware of their causes and practice prevention. That is the call of this National Cancer Awareness Day observed on 7th November each year on the birth day of Marie Curie who gave the world Radiotherapy, a potent weapon to kill cancer cells.

There is another aspect in cancer control. That is of early detection. If good numbers of cancers are preventable by adopting healthy life style and avoiding health abuses, still greater numbers can be cured through early detection. This dual strategy of prevention through avoidance of harmful substances and early detection through screening and regular periodical check up has worked for USA, registering a 32% fall in cancer mortality over a period of last 28 years from a peak incidence in 1991. The most effective contributing factor is a large drop in lung cancer mortality, through cessation of smoking and of course early detection and better treatment. Exactly opposite of what we are witnessing in cities like Calcutta , a rising incidence of lung cancer due to smoking. For a highly populous country like India with limited government resources , where one out of every ten person has the life time risk of developing cancer, people themselves need to know about prevention of cancer , know about its early signs and symptoms, and make a habit of getting themselves periodically and regularly checked.

There is still another aspect. Cancer creates many myths, stirs up many emotions, but typically it is associated with fear and uncertainty, fear of death and unmitigated suffering. That perception needs to be changed. As Indian Cancer Society says, Cancer is just a word, not a *sentence*. Cancer is just another chronic disease, that can be tamed. Many cancer survivors now live a completely normal life.

Raising awareness through campaigns forms the first line of defence in the battle against cancer.

The whole society needs to be involved in this battle and spread this message that this dreadful disease is largely preventable and mostly curable when detected in early stages.