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KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION ABOUT CANCER: A STUDY AMONG YOUTH IN DELHI

Oncology

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Cancer has become one of the major health challenges around the globe. Most of the cancers can be managed appropriately if these are identified early, which requires knowledge among the general population about the symptoms. Thus it is important to understand the knowledge and perception of people about the causes and symptoms of cancer. The present study examined knowledge and awareness of youth about the symptoms of cancer and studied their perception about myths associated with cancer.
Method: A sample of 80 college students was studied using a self developed questionnaire. The participants were invited through college circulars. The anonymous questionnaire was administered on a prescheduled time followed by an awareness session to the participants. Data was managed and analysed through MS excel using tabular-graphic representation and descriptive statistics.
Results: The study reported low level of knowledge among the college youth about early symptoms and causes of cancer. Myths about cancer being infectious, transmitted through casual contact and incurable were revealed among educated youth.
Conclusion: The educated youth are not able to identify the initial symptoms of cancer which may hinder early identification of the disease in family. The study emphasized the urgent need of information; education and communication campaigns about cancer through educational institutions so that entire family can be educated about the disease.

KEYWORDS

Cancer, Knowledge, Myths, Perception, Youth,

INTRODUCTION

The burden of cancer in India is steadily raising making cancer as one of the main health problems in present context. The National Cancer Registry report shows 75-80% of all cancer cases are presented at advanced stages[1]. It is now known that 70% of cancers in India are preventable[2] and their treatment may be highly responsive if diagnosed early. Personal habits such as use of tobacco and sedentary life style play key role in causation of cancer in addition to carcinogen and other unknown factors. People develop such habits in response to the social circumstances of life which can be modified through appropriate education and behaviour change mechanism. Thus, the control of cancer requires awareness among masses and the effective implementation of knowledge. In 1970s, the Government of India designed primary and secondary prevention strategies for the control of cancer. The major thrust area of the cancer control programme included – public education, treatment, palliative care and training facilities for human resource development[3]. Under the National Cancer Control Programme such efforts were carried out through district cancer control projects and campaigns for educating people about sign, symptoms and early identification of the most common cancers were initiated[4]. Youth is one of the powerful groups in our society with capacity to further spread education and information through various means of communication and behavioural practices. Thus, the present research aimed to assess the knowledge level of youth about symptoms and causes of cancer.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out among the college students selected from one of the college of University of Delhi. The aim was to assess the knowledge level regarding signs, symptoms, causes and perception of youth regarding various aspects of cancer viz. causes, symptoms and myths. A sample of 80 respondents was studied (n=80) using non-probability sampling techniques. All the students of the college were invited to participate in the survey through college circulars. Interested participants were given anonymous questionnaire to respond. The knowledge about causes and symptoms of cancer was assessed on binary response i.e Yes or No. Perception about cancer was studies on a 4 point scale ranging from never to always. The data collection phase was kept open for two weeks, during which a total of 80 students submitted completely filled up questionnaire. Data was analysed using MS excel spreadsheet and tabular-graphical representation was used for facilitating interpretation of the results.

RESULTS

The sample was highly dominated by female students (62%) while approximately 38% were male. The majority of respondents (89%) were from middle class followed by lower middle (5%) rest 3% each were from poor and high class. In 65% of cases, respondents did not see any known person suffering from cancer suggesting the limited role of experiential knowledge in this sample.

The respondents were given a list of probable causes of cancer and were asked to mark their answer as yes if they were sure of this being a cause of cancer. Figure 1 show that though a big majority (94%) marked tobacco use as a cause of cancer but only 72% attributed alcohol as a cause of cancer. Only 25% felt that ill-fitted denture may cause cancer and approximately 13% responded that sharp teeth may also result in cancer. Equal number of participants i.e. 20% each responded that heredity plays a role in cancer and eating spicy/ junk food may also cause cancer. Only 10% felt that eating non veg food may cause cancer.

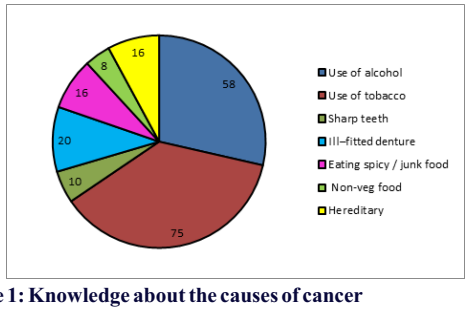

Figure 1: Knowledge about the causes of cancer

Participants were given a list of commonly known symptoms mixed with few unrelated conditions in order to assess their knowledge about symptoms of cancer. Participant were required to mark yes against each given conditions only if they were sure that same is a symptom of cancer. Figure 2 shows that a lump in breast was the most frequently mentioned symptom by the participants (65%), followed by unusual weight loss (55%). A high percentage of respondents marked yes for some of the unrelated conditions like hair loss/hair fall (50%), loss of appetite (45%), cracking of skin (40%), difficulty swallowing (38%) and darkening of skin(36%). Some of the most common symptoms of cancer like prolonged fever, unhealing sore, change in bowel/bladder habits, unusual vaginal bleeding were reported by very few respondents (30%). Approximately 20% reported hoarseness of voice and obvious change in wart/mole as symptoms of cancer.

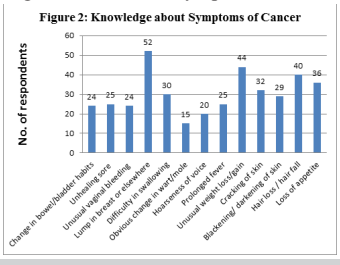

Figure 3 shows that though 37% of participants believed that cancer is never infectious but almost half of the sample responded (51%) that cancer is infectious to some degree. A big majority (42%) felt that cancer is always fatal and another 24% marked very high chances for cancer being fatal. One fourth of the sample shared that cancer is curable while, while 38% in total felt that either cancer is always incurable or have very high chances of the same. Though 65% shared that cancer can never be transmitted by casual contact like kissing or touching, but 20% thought that either there are high chance or cancer can always be transmitted through casual contact. Approximately 34% felt that piles may never turn cancerous and another 31% responded that it is rare for pile to turn cancerous. Another 45% in together shared that either piles will always turn into cancer or has very high chances for the same. Almost 48% responded that cancer never runs in family and another 38% marked rare risks for cancer to run in family while only 15% attributed risk of cancer in family.

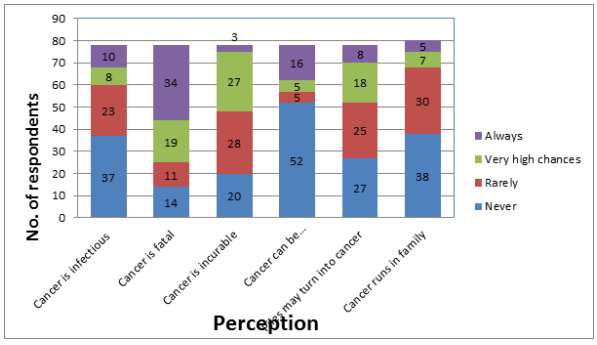

Figure 3: Perception about cancer

DISCUSSION

The study reflected the overall low level of knowledge among college youth on various aspects of cancer. The role of alcohol and tobacco in causation of cancer was widely reported by the youth. This may be a result of massive campaigns by the government and statuary warning on products and all sorts of media. Students were not aware that sharp teeth and ill fitted denture may cause cancer. Respondents were also not aware that eating spicy food may a causative factor for cancer though evidence suggest an association of spicy food with some cancers mainly oesophagus and gastrointestinal [5, 6]. The population based cancer registry also shows high incidence of stomach cancer in southern parts of India where food is relatively spicy[1, 5]. Evidence suggest that hoarsens of voice has been one of the most common reported symptom among laryngeal cancer patients[7] but findings of this study suggest that hoarseness of voice and obvious change in wart/mole was not widely known symptom of cancer among the young generation since approximately 20% reported these as probable symptoms. It is important to highlight here that respondents were not clear about actual signs or symptoms of cancer as the unrelated conditions like unusual weight loss/gain, cracking of skin, blackening/darkening of skin, hair loss and loss of appetite received higher response. This suggests that a big majority of college youth is unaware of the main warning signs of cancer. They can only relate onset of cancer with apparent lump. The study also revealed presence of myths about cancer among the young population. A remarkable proportion felt that cancer is infections, incurable and can be transmitted through casual contact, similar myths have also been observed among the patients by previous research[8].

The study suggested that a big majority of respondents did not witness any family member or friend suffering from cancer indicating the contribution of major information communication channels and mass media to their knowledge level. This suggests the urgent need of extensive awareness programmes among masses through information, education, communication (IEC) channels as well as integration of cancer awareness in school and colleges educational programmes.

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTH OF THE STUDY

The study could not enrol a big sample due to busy academic calendar of the students but involvement of youth from general society is the biggest strength of this study as youth are the main source of information dissemination in the society. Second, since majority of the participants in this study belonged to middle class so the findings may not be safely generalized about high and upper high classes and future research are needed to confirm the same.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that youth are not well aware of the warning signals and symptoms of cancer even though the government initiated awareness campaigns as early as 1970s suggesting that the programmes were either insufficient or could not reach to the masses. If youth have strong knowledge base about caner, the same can be transferred to the families and community at large. The extensive information education and communication campaigns through mass media and educational institutions are needed to make general public aware about the initial symptoms of cancer. This may contribute to early diagnosis of cancer reducing the cancer burden and mortality in the country.

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