Can breast cancer be eradicated in eight years?

By ACSH Staff — December 7, 2012

Is the goal of eradicating breast cancer by 2020 unrealistic and overly ambitious? We were inclined to agree [1] with a Nature editorial [2] that said so, but one of our readers says no. Dr. Stephen Albert Johnston with the Center for Innovations in Medicine, Arizona State University shared with us a letter he wrote to Nature defending the National Breast Cancer Coalition’s 20/20 initiative, saying it was borne of frustration with slow progress against cancer.

The preventative vaccine is one of the ideas the NBCC is supporting as a new approach, Dr. Johnston writes. Nature concluded that this idea and others of the NBCC are not goals that are within the realms of possibility. You cite the genomic complexity in tumors and that any clinical trial for such a vaccine would take a decade to validate as reasons for the pessimism. But the genomic complexity apparent in mature tumors is irrelevant to developing a preventative vaccine. ...

It is true that if we use standard clinical standards of today to conduct a preventative cancer vaccine trial it could take a decade or more to validate the treatment. By this logic a preventative vaccine would never be available. The issue then is to rethink how we would conduct such a trial. For example, if there were ways to definitively detect tumors very early it could make the clinical trials shorter and less expensive. So we and an increasing number of other researchers believe that a preventative vaccine may be achievable and the possibility should be explored vigorously.

Dr. Johnston says that given the alternatives, we should embrace the 2020 goal.

Dr. Bloom has written [3] that given the complexity of cancer, the prospect of a cure anytime soon is probably wishful thinking.

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