Can cancer be prevented with taxes and government regulation?

By ACSH Staff — February 11, 2014

Recent reports published by the World Health Organization predict a dramatic rise in cancer cases worldwide. Within the next 20 years, cases will increase from 14 million (2012) annually to 22 million. Experts in medicine and science agree the burden of cancer can be reduced with appropriate preventive public health policies.

However, the boundaries of public health [1] power are being stretched and redefined to include underlying political agendas. The latest report on the rise of cancer has been followed by recommendations to federally regulate alcohol, fast food, and soft drinks. Taxes on fizzy drinks are not the solution to behavior change or preventing this global epidemic. While unhealthy lifestyles do contribute to cancer, the escalation in disease rates is primarily attributed to an ageing population worldwide.

According to Dr. Walter Curran, chairman of the Department of Radiation Oncology at Emory University's School of Medicine in Atlanta, cancer mortality in the United State is trending downward if you adjust for our aging population. Curran goes on to add [2] a 20-year old American who doesn’t smoke, who has a good diet and a healthy lifestyle, someone with moderate alcohol consumption and who takes preventive health measures like regularly seeing a doctor and getting exercise -- their chance of cancer is significantly less than someone who for example lives in a developing country in Africa right now.

Cancer is caused by a wide host of cellular insults that with age become inevitable. Certainly, leading environmental factors such as smoking and obesity must be prevented in our society. However, regulation and law cannot control biology.
ACSH’s Dr. Gil Ross had this to say: These are wise words indeed. Cancer is the final common pathway, in many respects, that awaits the healthy aging population who have managed to escape heart and other vascular conditions and dementia. But as cells age, mutations accumulate, neoplasia is inevitable. There is no public health solution for this problem, other than to eradicate those conditions that foreshorten lifespans prematurely, leaving the very old to come down with...something. Often, it’s cancer.

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