

Socio-Psychological and economic impacts of cancer: A case of the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The paper studies the social, psychological and economic impacts of cancer in general and in the United Kingdom in particular. The paper brings out the fact how dreadful cancer is. It not only affects the patients physically but also financially, socially and psychologically. Also, cancer has severe effects on the patients' family, close relatives, and friends. A small case-study of the United Kingdom brings out the cancer prevalence and the increase in the number of deaths in the four major parts of the UK- England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Various studies by different institutions and organisations brings out some important facts like how cancer in the UK affects the financial status of the person living with cancer, how the number of cancer patients has increased over the years in the UK and how living in different parts of UK have different impacts on the person's financial and mental state.

Keywords: Cancer, Socio-psychological, Economic, United Kingdom

Introduction

Our body is having billions of cells, and each cell is under control at the genetic level. The genes present on the chromosome located in the nucleus are the center for control as well as loss of control. The chromosomes have genes which once activated can cause the uncontrolled division of the cells, termed as oncogenes. However, there are suppressor genes also which do not allow the unchecked cell division but if by any mean, they are deactivated, can lead to uncontrolled cell division. This uncontrolled cell division leads to cancer. Cancer is the second most prevalent disease worldwide after cardiovascular disease. There are several factors such as genetic, mutation, infection which can cause the induction of cancer. Smoking, consumption of grilled meat, pollution, less physical activity, and obesity are some other factors which can initiate or aggravate cancer. Cancer is not a single day disease, but it develops over a period of several years.

Cancer can affect any part of the body including lung, stomach, breast, cervix, intestine, prostate, brain, skin, etc. Their prevalence can differ with gender as well as geographical position. For example, Lung, prostate, colorectal, stomach and liver cancer are the most common types of cancer in men, whereas breast, colorectal, lung, cervix and stomach cancer are the most common among women. According to WHO, 8.8 million people died from cancer in 2015 which is 1 in 6 of all global deaths. Out of these deaths, 30-50% deaths could be prevented by following some precautions such as reducing alcohol consumption, avoiding tobacco products, exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy body weight, and addressing infection-related risk factors. Other than that, deaths caused by cancer worldwide could be further reduced by effective and affordable programmes in early diagnosis, screening, treatment, and palliative care ^[1].

Cancer can be cured if diagnosed early and treated properly. The incidences of cancer deaths vary between developed and developing countries ^[2]. It is because of the management of cancer which includes the cost of the treatment, facilities available and awareness among the population. The affordability for cancer management significantly differs among developed and developing countries. It is estimated that the total economic cost of cancer in 2010 was 1.16 trillion dollar and it is increasing with years ^[1]. Developed countries majorly share this massive cost of cancer.

As mentioned above, cancer is the second most common diseases existing in the society today with some limited medical access and availability. With the rising cases of cancer, it becomes imperative to understand the socio-economic impact of cancer in the society, and the paper particularly deals with cancer and its effects in the United Kingdom (UK). When it's the UK, it implies four countries within the United Kingdom- England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Before the paper deals with the socio-economic impact of cancer in the society of UK, it is vital to look into some of the important statistics that provide an insight into this dreadful disease called Cancer and its impact in the UK.

According to the Cancer Research UK, the total number of new cases of cancer reported in 2014 were 356,860, the total number of deaths from cancer in the UK in 2014 were 163,444. Also, the percentage of patients who survived cancer for ten or more years in England and Wales was reportedly 50% as per the 2010-11 data. And finally, the preventable cases of cancer reported in the UK were 42% ^[3]. One can see from these statistics that cancer as a disease is quite widespread in the UK and UK has some of the sophisticated institutes dealing with the same. But before the study of

institutes and other related things in the UK, let's look at some of the common socio-economic effects of cancer that can be seen worldwide.

Social and Psychological Implications of Cancer

Almost all the cancer survivors and cancer patients throughout the world have witnessed different problems and fears apart from the one they are facing physically. Nothing could describe the pain of a patient who has cancer and undergoing the painful treatment. Here are some of the most impact socio-psychological impacts of cancer in the society.

Depression is one of the first major issues that cancer patients go through throughout their life. It is estimated that 70% of cancer survivors experience depression at some point in their life. The worst part about it is that the symptoms they show are very similar to the already existing signs they have due to cancer like fatigue, insomnia, loss of weight, inability to concentrate, etc. and hence it's challenging to diagnose depression in the cancer patients especially in an environment when depression itself has become one of the most rampant problems found in majority of the population in one form or the other [4].

The second major social impact of cancer is the bodily changes vis-à-vis their societal interaction. It is beyond any doubt that the cancer patients undergo a lot of bodily changes owing to the various chemotherapy sessions they take, for instance, hair fall, weight loss, going completely bald, etc. All these physical changes in their body affect their mental health and consequently their societal interactions. It's very difficult for them to accept this "new" you within themselves. They become self-conscious while dealing with the outside world, their entire social and professional life becomes challenging. They are not able to communicate themselves with others with the sheer risk of the kind of response they might get, both from the society and their workplace [5].

The third major socio-psychological effect of cancer is the effect on the patient's relationships. Cancer in a patient creates a lot of strain on their close and distant relationships. People react to the cancer patients differently, the more sympathetic attitude of the relatives makes the patient more conscious of themselves. Friends, family members, and co-workers feel it awkward to discuss anything with the cancer patient especially their diagnosis part and which in turn makes the patient as someone who is not one amongst them and therefore more anti-social [4].

Economic Implications of Cancer

It is believed that compared to any other disease and any other illness, cancer has the greatest cost worldwide [6]. The economic implications of cancer are severe especially for the patients' near ones, family, and relatives. The cancer care costs are a huge financial burden, and it's almost giving up all the life's savings especially for the middle and the lower class people. The cost that cancer treatment incurs is huge and is expected to rise with the rise in the number of cancer cases as well as with the rise in the development of new sophisticated techniques/procedures of treating cancer.

According to one of the estimates by the World Health Organisation (WHO), from 2004-2030, global cancer deaths will increase from 7.4 million to 11.8 million and that cancer

will be the leading cause of death among people, after heart disease and stroke (Cancer Connect). In order to determine the economic burden of cancer, a research was carried out by a group of researchers who estimated the economic value of a year of healthy life and analysed around 17 types of cancer and 15 leading causes of death in order to calculate the intensity of the financial burden that families of cancer patients go through. Also, in this research, countries worldwide were classified on the basis of their income. The researchers came up with some findings- the few important ones are as follows. It was found that in 2008, the cost of premature death and disability due to cancer (and not direct medical costs from cancer) was found to be \$895 billion worldwide as compared to the heart diseases whose overall cost was around \$753 billion. This shows that the cost that cancer as a disease incurs is far more than what the most commonly occurring heart diseases have globally. It was also found in the research that lost productivity and lost years of life are responsible for cancer's largest drain on economy which means many productive years of a cancer patient is wasted due to this illness, even though he recovers, he cannot contribute fully to the economy and secondly the deaths resulting due to cancer hinders the economic growth in one form or the other [7].

The research also came up with the findings that lung, colorectal and breast cancers are associated with the greatest cost worldwide, and in poorer countries, head and neck cancers, cervical cancer and breast cancer are associated with the most enormous cost due to death and disability. The overall conclusion of this research is actually the focus on the need for some global health strategies and technology to deal with this dangerous disease called cancer so that the disability and deaths resulting from cancer can be reduced and therefore reducing the global economic impact of cancer, both for the families concerned and for the overall development of the society [7].

Thus, it can be said that cancer is an extremely costly disease not only in terms of the medical treatment it requires but also in terms of its overall impact on the society. There should be some exclusive focus on preventive services which in the long run are effective, proper resources are required to efficiently manage the disease so that its adverse implications can be minimised, different strategies to cope up with this disease in different countries, for instance developing countries need more financial assistance as compared to the developed ones. Also, there should be some more special arrangements for patients belonging to the lower and middle class so that cancer does not shackle the roots of the patients' family both mentally as well as financially.

Cancer and Its Impact in the United Kingdom

The first question that comes to the mind is what was the whole purpose of choosing United Kingdom for this study? The first answer to which is, the following statistics that show that there are many cases of cancer in the UK and there needs to be an urgent attention on to it. The second answer is the availability of the data to consider in our paper. The statistics from the UK are as follows:

There are an estimated 2.5 million people suffering from cancer in the UK which is expected to rise to 4 million by

2030. Also, the number of cancer patients in the UK in 2015 has increased by almost half a million people since 2010 till 2015. Other statistics include the number of older people aged between 65 and above who are suffering from cancer has grown by 23% in the five years (2010-2015). Also, the number of people who have survived cancer for more than five years since diagnosis has increased by over 260,000 which is equal to 21% in the five years (2010-2015). Another very important statistic is that the number of people living with cancer in the UK is increasing by 3% every year which is a very alarming outcome. Table 1 is showing the estimated number of people suffering from cancer, nation-wide in the UK, at the end of 2010, 2015, 2020 and 2030^[8].

With this we can easily see, the rise in the number of cancer cases in the UK and they are expected to rise with every coming year and hence it is an alarming situation for the countries of UK to take some precautionary measure as well as come up with some methods and techniques to make this disease curable in the best possible way it can be. With this, it's also important to look at the statistics that show the number of deaths resulting from cancer in various countries of UK for the year 2014. Table 2 shows the same.

Table 1: Estimated number of people suffering from cancer, nation-wide in the UK

	2010	2015	2020	2030
England	1,700,000	2,000,000	2,400,000	3,400,000
Wales	110,000	130,000	160,000	220,000
Scotland	190,000	220,000	260,000	360,000
Northern Ireland	53,000	63,000	74,000	100,000
UK*	2,100,000	2,500,000	2,900,000	4,000,000

Note*: UK totals may not sum up precisely due to rounding of figures. Source: Maddams *et al.* 2012^[8].

With the help of the above statistics and data, it is clear that over two million people are suffering from cancer in the UK alone. There are some who die due to this disease, and then there are those who survive cancer but are confronted with various other challenges and repercussions. Cancer and its treatment often leave a scathing injury throughout the life of a patient, both physically and mentally. There are many social, psychological and economic effects of cancer and some of them have already been discussed but let's study these factors again in the light of the United Kingdom.

Table 2: Number of deaths resulting from cancer in various countries of UK for the year 2014

	Every Day	Every Week	Every Month	Every Year
England	366	2560	11,140	133720
Wales	43	300	1310	15750
Scotland	24	170	740	8930
Northern Ireland	12	80	350	4250
UK*	446	3120	13550	162,640

Source: Maddams *et al.* 2012^[8].

Economic constraints

Macmillan conducted a research in the United Kingdom analyzing the various impacts of cancer, both on families and society and came up with the following results. Macmillan

commissioned in 2012, the University of Bristol's Personal Finance Research and TNS BMRB to research the economic impact of cancer on people across the UK. The research focuses on the sheer financial burden faced by the people living with cancer in the United Kingdom. The study says that four in five people, equivalent to 83% people who have cancer are affected by the financial impact of cancer, costing up to an average of 570 pounds a month in the UK^[9].

Reduced income was another major factor highlighted in the research and is found to be the reason for financial hardship. It was estimated that almost one in three people (30%) living with cancer experienced a loss of income due to their treatment and diagnosis while a third of respondents, around 33% stopped working either temporarily or permanently, thereby posing a substantial financial burden on the family of the patient. It was calculated that those affected by it, lose on an average of 860 pounds a month which is huge. Apart from this, some of the other cost that the cancer patient and his family incur is in terms of the frequent visits they have to make to the doctor for a regular check-up. The amount of money increases dramatically vis-à-vis the daily expenditure of the patient and his family is concerned, for instance, keeping in mind the facilities required for the patient in terms of food, environment, specialized equipments, home modifications, etc.^[9].

Most importantly, as far as the UK is concerned, the cost of the cancer patient also depends significantly on the country where they reside within the UK. Overall, as part of this research, the crucial factors that actually had an impact on either the cancer patient or his family or even both in many cases were the person's age, which level they are in their cancer journey, their employment status and finally their income before they were diagnosed with this dreadful disease called cancer. Let's just look into how these factors played an influential role in the life of the cancer patient in different countries of UK.

As per the data available, people suffering from cancer in England tend to be more affected by the cost of parking as the amount incurred is tremendous in England for outpatient appointments as compared to Scotland and Wales where car parking outside hospitals is free and Northern Ireland where people undergoing chemotherapy and radiotherapy are eligible for free parking. These things although seems not that big an issue, but they have a significant impact on the financial system of the family concerned. Also, it is said that cancer patients need to live and stay in a comparatively hot environment and hence heating the home is an entirely difficult task for a person living with cancer in Northern Ireland as compared to the rest of the UK. This is so because Northern Ireland primarily relies on oil for heating which is more expensive than gas or electricity^[9].

Thus, the above data shows that how hard it is to live for a person diagnosed with cancer, both physically as well as economically. However, it is important to note that the social and psychological impact of cancer on people living in the UK is same for any other person suffering from cancer anywhere in the world, and therefore the socio-psychological impacts have already been discussed above, and they entirely stands true in the case of the United Kingdom as well^[10].

Conclusion

After going through the in-depth analysis of the above facts and figures, one can find out how dreadful and dangerous Cancer is. From physical to mental to economical and psychological, cancer affects all these aspects once a person acquires it. The one major reason why this disease is still considered the most dangerous amongst many is because of its treatment and the difficulty in curing a person due to lack of effective medical treatments available. This disease is almost incurable for a person belonging to the poor family because the poor families can not manage the cost that cancer and its treatment involves. Thus, the need of the hour is coming up with new methods of treatment, proper curing mechanisms and effective government policies to help those people who are poor and cannot afford the high cost of cancer and its treatment and make this disease curable in every form it exists.

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