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Asia's cancer rate may jump by almost 60 percent by 2020.



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SINGAPORE — Asia's cancer rate may jump by almost 60 percent to 7.1 million new cases a year by 2020, straining the region's ill-prepared health systems, according to Richard Horton, editor of the British medical journal Lancet.

Aging populations, tobacco use and increasing rates of obesity are fueling the incidence of deadly tumors in Asian patients too poor to afford the most advanced treatments, Horton said at an international cancer meeting in Singapore over the weekend.

Asia's prevalence of cancer deaths may climb 45 percent to 163 per 100,000 people by 2030, from about 112 per 100,000 in 2005, according to the World Health Organization. At that rate it would overtake the Americas, where cancer-related mortalities are expected to rise to 156 per 100,000 from 136 over the same period.

Europe, which has the highest prevalence at 215 per 100,000, may increase about 9 percent to 234 per 100,000.

"There really is going to be an incredible pandemic of cancer like we've not seen — we couldn't have imagined it — over the next 20 years," Horton said in an interview in Singapore, where he spoke at the Lancet Asia Medical Forum. "We barely have the health systems to handle infectious diseases, so how on earth are we going to deal with this?"

Cancer already kills more people worldwide than AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. Spending to prevent and treat chronic diseases such as cancer and diabetes may slow the expansion of China and India, the world's two fastest-growing major economies, researchers said at the meeting in Singapore.

"It is going to cost them a fortune in terms of health care expenditure," Horton said, adding that it would "eliminate a huge number of people from the labor market. We think AIDS is a disaster to the world now. You have seen nothing yet."

It costs close to \$50,000 in Britain to treat a breast cancer patient using the drug Herceptin, which generated \$3.2 billion in sales last year for its manufacturer, Roche,

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and its partner Genentech. In comparison, per capita government expenditure on health was \$4 in Bangladesh, \$7 in India, \$11 in Indonesia and \$22 in China in 2003, according World Health Organization data.

Asia accounted for about half the 7 million cancer deaths worldwide in 2002, with 23 percent in China alone, D. Maxwell Parkin, a visiting research fellow at the University of Oxford's clinical trial service unit, told the forum.

"Historically in developing countries, people died before they could get cancer," said You-Lin Qiao, a professor of cancer epidemiology at the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences in Beijing. "Now they are living longer, we're seeing more cancer" and degenerative diseases of the brain, he said.

The majority of China's rural dwellers do not have health insurance, Qiao said in an interview. The cost of treatment, therefore, is borne by the entire family.

Attacks by angry patients and family members on China's medical personnel almost doubled last year to 9.83 million cases, with 5,519 staff members hurt, causing 200 million yuan, or \$26 million, in costs, the official Xinhua news agency reported last week, citing Deputy Health Minister Chen Xiaohong.

The violence reflects the growing frustration in China over a health system struggling to provide affordable medical care, said Tony Mok, professor of clinical oncology at Prince of Wales Hospital in Hong Kong, who consults in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou.

"The doctor treats the patient," Mok said. "The family thinks it is going to work. They get all their money, sell their cow, sell their house, and then the patient dies. They get very angry."

"If nothing happens, there will be a disaster," said Franco Cavalli, president of the International Union Against Cancer, based in Geneva. "For the time being, governments don't realize, or do not want to realize, that this is a bomb which is going to explode."


Developing nations in Asia have little access to anti-cancer drugs now, with the United States, Europe and Japan absorbing 95 percent of the global supply.

Lung cancer, Asia's biggest cancer-killer and driven by tobacco-smoking, may increase 42 percent to almost a million deaths a year between 2005 and 2015, the agency reported. Stomach cancer, the second-biggest type of the disease in Asia, may grow 25 percent to 1.2 million deaths a year over the same period, the World Health Organization says.

The "Westernization" of Asian diets, including rising consumption of alcohol and red meat, is causing higher rates of breast, colon and rectal cancer, Oxford's Parkin said.

Pursuing sophisticated drugs and technologies for treating cancer patients "is incredibly high-cost and probably beyond the bounds of most countries" in Asia, said Horton, of the Lancet. Instead, he said, priority should be given to a campaign to stop smoking, increase exercise and consumption of fruit and vegetables, prevent obesity and reduce salt.

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