

CANCER TOLL RISE IN '75 A MISTAKE

Apparently Dramatic Trend
in First 7 Months Laid
to the Vagaries of Data

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 28—The apparent dramatic increase in the nation's cancer death rate is the first seven months of 1975 resulted from vagaries of data and does not reflect a real disease trend, Government experts said today.

An expert from the National Cancer Institute described it today as "the increase that wasn't there." A statistician of the National Center for Health Statistics said a flu epidemic last January and February may have been a key factor in the seeming increase in the cancer death rate.

A rise in flu customarily brings increases in deaths from chronic diseases such as heart disease and cancer presumably because flu weakens persons nearing death from their underlying illnesses.

Provisional data for the first seven months of last year showed a 5.2 percent rise in cancer death rate over the comparable period of 1974. For years the rate has risen 1 percent a year.

The 5.2 percent increase was published, without comment, last November in a routine vital statistics report of the National Center for Health Statistics. The startling size of the apparent increase immediately brought much publicity to the figure amid speculation as to its causes.

The National Cancer Institute, main Federal agency for cancer research, received more than 50 inquiries from Congress in a week. Some persons suggested that the increase might be a result of some unknown man-made pollution of the environment several decades ago. Experts at the cancer institute began a painstaking search of the available data in cooperation with the statistics center.

Imperfections and Vagaries

Today, at a lecture for cancer institute staff members, Dr. Leonard Chiazze Jr., chief of the institute's biometry branch, said the apparent rise seems to have resulted from imperfections and vagaries of the data.

Dr. Chiazze, a bio-statistician, said the provisional data for the seven months had indeed shown an over-all cancer death rate of 176.3 deaths for each 100,000 persons in the population and that this was a 5.2 percent increase over the previous year.

Provisional data for the first nine months of the year, however, brought the rise over 1974 down to 2.8 percent, he said, and compensating for some vagaries of data would lower this still further to 2.3 percent.

What the real rate will be will not be known until the final data for 1975 become available late this year. The scientists said provisional data were far less reliable than final data and the over-all cancer death rate was far less meaningful than rates subdivided according to age, sex, race and particular type of cancer.

The trend of the last seven years has been a roughly 1 percent a year increase in cancer deaths, with the growing number of older people in the United States evidently a major contributing factor.

Factor of Flu Outbreak

At the meeting today, Robert Armstrong, chief of the Mortality Statistics Branch of the National Center for Health Statistics, said he believed the flu outbreak last winter might have contributed greatly to the illusory cancer trend. He said there was no comparable flu in 1974 and that this would enhance the seeming difference between the two years.

As an aside, he said final over-all United States mortality figures for 1974 would be made public next week and would show that year to have had the lowest over-all death rate in the 75 years of record keeping.

Deaths from automobile accidents were down sharply from 55,000 in 1973 to about 45,000 in 1974, perhaps because of the gasoline shortage. Furthermore, there was little flu in 1974.

Mr. Armstrong and Dr. Chiazze noted that the monthly provisional figures, which caused so much excitement concerning cancer, were neither suitable as, nor intended as, guides to trends in cancer or any other chronic disease. The figures are published to give early warning of major acute disease outbreaks.

Indeed, the irony of the provisional cancer data is that the figures for the first three months of 1975 were in even more startling contrast to 1974 than were the seven-month data.

Provisional figures for the January-February-March period showed a 6.2 percent rise over 1974, Mr. Armstrong said. When April was added, the disparity rose to 6.7 percent. By the time nonstatisticians first noticed the trend—after seven months—it was already well on the way down.

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