March 2000 - N°8

ECHO

Spotlight on research

Give it a break!

In the course of our activities to support cancer research, we are constantly aware that this is one of the most complex and feared illnesses of our times. Despite the progress made in preventing or treating the different forms of cancer, many patients still feel helpless and lost; some even experience shame. More than ever, the need for an understanding ear and psychological support are at the root of the problem. Even though we are concerned primarily with the vital issue of research we are all too often surprised and sad to witness the lack of communication and information offered to patients in the midst of their battle. Cancer must be fought on every front, from research to prevention; from providing information to applying new clinical treatments. We hope to see this happen, so that cancer sufferers and those around them may feel comforted and less alone.

Thierry F. Ador

Living proof

Verena Galeras, under treatment for breast cancer

(...) When my doctor called me in, I felt very anxious and apprehensive. My first reaction was to refuse the facts. I was terribly upset; I felt so sorry for myself and I had one word in my mind all the time: cancer. Then, back home after the operation, I felt really good, full of energy. It was only two months later, at my first session of radiotherapy, when I was actually under the machine, that I realised; not what cancer is in itself, but the impact that it can have. Before, I had wanted to ignore the illness, and now, at this precise moment, it hit me, I really went to pieces. The treatment made me face the truth, but even today cancer seems foreign to me, I can't accept what happened (...).

Note: breast cancer is a major public health issue in Switzerland today, where one woman in nine suffers from it.

Source: Temps Présent, December 99

What's up, doc?

Current anti-cancer treatments could be made more effective and their undesirable effects could be reduced, thanks to a new strategy devised and tested, at this stage on mice, by a research team at the University of Illinois (Chicago, US). Existing therapeutic approaches usually consist of activating the mechanisms that protect the cells' properties in order to arrest the growth of diseased cells. By contrast, Dr Gudkov's team came up with the concept of blocking these mechanisms in all the body's normal cells. This strategy centres round a protein called p53, which controls the elimination of diseased cells, but also encourages that of healthy cells. The researchers' challenge was to find the molecule that would block changes in the p53 protein, without causing additional tumours. Thanks to a compound christened PFT alpha, the cells that divide normally are no longer attacked by anti-cancer products, which greatly reduces undesirable effects.
The process may thus enable patients to support higher doses of radiation.

Source: le Monde, September 99

Researchers solve medical problems, we solve their money problems

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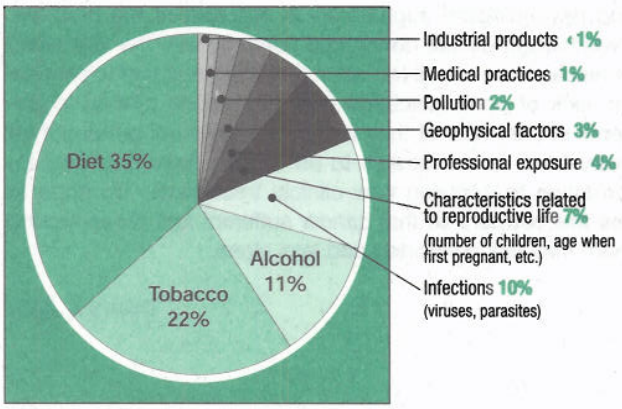
On the front line

True to its objective, the Foundation is this year financing the work of four more young researchers to whom it has awarded grants. Dr Karim Abid is conducting an in vitro research project on the interaction between the hepatitis C virus and apoptosis at the Geneva Canton University Hospital. The Japanese researcher, Dr Kenji Shimada, has undertaken a project entitled " highlighting the role of kinases promotion during phase S of cell division " at the Swiss Institute for Experimental Research into Cancer (Institut Suisse de Recherches Expérimentales sur le Cancer (ISREC) in the canton of Vaud. Dr Joseph Riss, of the Hebrew University Hadassah in Jerusalem, Israel, but in residence in Washtington is researching the molecular biology of the VHL (Von Hippellindau Cancer syndrome) Dr Pierre Chappuis, at Macgill University of Montreal, Canada is working on two projects: the first concerns the basic BRCA 1 and BRCA 2 mutations in the French-Canadian population; the second investigates the localisation of a gene of sensitivity to prostate cancer on chromosome X, by studying three distinct populations.

Vital statistics

In France, cancer kills close to 150,000 people every year. But the number has stopped growing: while some types of cancer are increasing, others are regressing. Modern medicine is already able to combat some of the most fatal kinds, aided by a change of lifestyle and avoidance of the risk factors, especially cigarettes and alcohol.

Percentage of deaths by cancer in France attributable to different factors



Planet research.

- For the first time, an ultrasonic device is being tested in France and the US as a treatment for prostate cancer. Its name: the Ablatherm. The treatment consists of destroying the tumour locally by focusing on it with high-intensity ultrasonics.

Source: Santé Magazine, N° 288

- A US research team recently succeeded in deciphering the four stages that are essential to transform a normal cell into a cancerous cell. This discovery will lead to better understanding of the way the disease works, and enable more finely targeted treatments. Above all, it provides categorical proof that cancer is a series of precise genetic mutations.

Source: Tribune de Genève, Nature, July 99

- Herceptin, a new treatment for breast cancer, was launched on the Swiss market in August 1999. This product slows up the growth of metastatic cancer in thirty percent of patients. The treatment will target tumours presenting a protein specific to breast cancers.

Source: Tribune de Genève, August 99

- A first analysis of genetic influence on cancer development proves that heredity plays a major role in only a limited number of cancers. This subject is now well documented, particularly regarding ovarian, breast and colon cancers. Researchers have already identified over twenty genes.

Source: Santé Magazine, N° 288

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