

Cancer Rising

With instances of the disease increasing rapidly, preventing and fighting it becomes more difficult

By Yuan Yuan



REASSURANCE: A doctor at Beijing Xuanwu Hospital answers questions about bladder cancer during an activity to promote public awareness on June 15

Kaifu Lee, the former head of Google China, said that he was diagnosed with lymphoma on his micro-blog on September 5.

"Life is limited. Everyone is equal in the face of cancer," said Lee, 51, who currently runs venture capital fund Innovation Works, in a post on Sina Weibo, China's twitter-like micro-blogging service. His statement was forwarded nearly 7,000 times within half an

hour. Lee's high-profile announcement drew increased public attention to cancer, which is a leading cause of death in China.

A report released by China's National Central Cancer Registry in January showed that an average of six people are diagnosed with cancer every minute in the country. Every day, 8,550 patients begin treatment for the disease, which claims 2.5 million lives every year in China.

The report also revealed that lung, stomach, colorectal, liver and esophageal cancers are the most prevalent, with lung cancer having the highest mortality rate. "Deaths from lung cancer have risen by 465 percent in the past 30 years," it said.

The Beijing Residential Health Report, released at the start of the year by the Beijing Municipal Health Bureau, said that in 2001-11, the city's cancer morbidity rates grew by 48 percent.

Bad habits

"With an aging society, China has more and more elderly cancer patients," said Chen Wanqing, Deputy Director of China's National Cancer Prevention and Control Research Office.

According to China's sixth national population census, the results of which were released in April, China has 145 million people over 60, accounting for 11 percent of the country's population. This group is growing at a rate of more than 3 percent per year. Experts predict that in the next 30 years, China will see its elderly population exceeding 400 million.

"It is a big challenge since older people are at a higher risk of cancer," Chen said.

Worse still, medical experts warn that young people are also at risk.

Xu Congjian, President of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Hospital of Fudan University in Shanghai, said that women suffering from cancer are younger than before. His statistics showed that among all gynecological cancer patients, 21 percent are young women without children.

Lee said that the cancer had made him second-guess the physical sacrifices he had made during his career. "I naively used to compete with others to see who could sleep less," he wrote on Sina Weibo. "It's only now, when I'm suddenly faced with possibly losing 30 years of life, that I've been able to calm down and reconsider. That sort of persistence may have been a mistake."

"The high rates of cancer come from a change in lifestyles," said Wang Ning, Deputy Director of the Beijing Institute for Cancer Research under the Beijing Cancer Hospital. "For example, colorectal cancer was not in the top five a decade ago, but now it has become the second most common after lung cancer."

"Twenty percent of deaths due to cancer in China are related to diet, nutrition and a lack

of exercise," said Lei Haichao, Deputy Director of the Beijing Municipal Health Bureau. He added that obesity and alcohol abuse have also increased the number of deaths from cancer.

Wang said that more than 20 percent of cancer cases she dealt with could have been treated successfully if people had paid more attention to their health and had it diagnosed earlier.

"Public notions of keeping yourself in good health need adjustment, and they are contributing to deaths from cancer," Wang said. "Unwillingness to take medical tests as well as ignorance about health issues are still common."

Environmental factors

Environmental pollution has also been blamed for increasing cancer rates.

"There is a misguided concept that lung cancer is only caused by smoking," said Zhang Zhiyong, a doctor with the Department of Cerebral Surgery at Peking Union Medical College Hospital. "Recent clinical findings show that non-smokers outnumber smokers amongst all lung cancer patients."

"Focusing on reducing air pollutant emissions should be prioritized rather than urging people to adopt a healthy lifestyle," said Ma Jun, Director of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs, a non-governmental organization in Beijing. "Although not doing physical exercise weakens the immune system, exercise can harm the body when the air is full of smog," he said.

The Beijing Residential Health Report also showed much lower cancer rates in the suburbs, where pollution is less than in built-up areas of the city.

Ma added that a research conducted by the American Cancer Society between 1982 and 1998 found a correlation between levels of particulate matter that is 2.5 micrometers or smaller in size (PM2.5) and lung cancer mortality rates. The research team observed increases of 8 percent in deaths from lung cancer with PM2.5 increases of 10 micrograms per cubic meter. Beijing's average PM2.5 levels currently surpass 110 micrograms per cubic meter, according to the number of the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP). This would suggest an increase in lung cancer mortality rates of more than 90 percent.

In rural areas, the situation is simi-



BROADER COVERAGE: Lung, esophagus and gastric cancers are all covered by a social insurance program for those suffering from serious diseases as of 2013

larly severe. Around 10 deaths from cancer were reported annually by Duying Village near Zhoukou City, central China's Henan Province, between 2003 and 2010. "The years with the highest cancer rates were also the years with the most severe pollution," said Du Weimin, a village official.

A chemical risk control plan issued by the MEP in February also mentioned serious health and social problems such as "cancer villages" in some regions.

Prior to this, a research completed three years ago by Yang Gonghuan, former Deputy Director of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, had already revealed a connection between water pollution and risk of cancer in rural areas along the Huaihe River that flows through Henan, Anhui and Jiangsu provinces.

According to figures released by the MEP in 2012, ground water at 57 percent of monitoring sites across China is polluted or extremely polluted. In addition, 298 million rural residents do not have access to safe drinking water.

Preventative measures

"In the next 10 years, the number of cancer patients will continue to rise in China and by 2020 an estimated 6.6 million people will be diagnosed with cancer each year," Chen said.

Wang also holds a pessimistic view of the development of China's cancer situation. "We'll be lucky if, in 10 years' time, the situation just stops worsening," he said. "There is no chance incidences of cancer will drop in that time."

The prognosis for lung cancer, China's most deadly form of the disease, is even bleaker, with experts at the Beijing Cancer Hospital quoted as saying that the country is expected to see a blowout in incidences of lung cancer by 2033.

Wei Kuangrong, who has been working at the Cancer Registry Station in Zhongshan City, Guangdong Province, for 10 years, is not surprised by situation.

"In Zhongshan in 2009 there was an average of 8.34 people diagnosed with cancer every day, while in 1970, the average was just 0.78," Wei said.

Wei also revealed that in 1990s, nasopharyngeal cancer was the most common in Zhongshan, while in 2009, lung and colorectal cancers became the most prevalent.

"This is not because we have less nasopharyngeal cancer patients, on the contrary, the number of those patients is increasing faster than before," Wei said. "But the number of lung and colorectal cancer patients has increased even quicker."

The increasing instances of cancer have prompted the government to increase efforts in prevention and treatment.

In 2003, the Ministry of Health announced plans to improve cancer registration to help battle the disease. By the end of 2012, there had been 222 cancer registry stations across the country, serving a population of 200 million. The National Cancer Prevention and Control Research Office said that it will update figures relating to the situation of cancer in China every five years, using information collected by local registry stations.

In 2002, the government included breast and cervical cancers in a social insurance program for those suffering from serious diseases. Beginning this year, lung, esophagus and gastric cancers are also covered by the program, with maximum reimbursement of 90 percent of medical bills. ■

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