

Inequalities in cancer services

There are currently inequalities in uptake of cancer screening services based on socioeconomic status. Women from lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to attend both cervical and breast screening and evidence from the web screening programme supports the existence of such inequalities in uptake.⁵⁶⁷

There is evidence that those from lower socioeconomic groups use health services in relation to need, often referred to as the inverse care law. At the same time this group is more likely to have cancer diagnosed at an advanced stage which negatively impacts upon the range of treatment options available and the chances of a good outcome. The increased presence of co-morbidities and risky health and lifestyle factors may also mean that those from lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to be able to physically cope with some cancer treatments. Finally, there is evidence that those from deprived areas are less likely to use palliative care services and if they do, they are less likely to use them in their own homes. This may be because of less availability of such services in areas with increased rates of deprivation, or may be low levels of awareness of available services among communities.

Next steps

Cancer Research UK calls for a firm commitment from all political parties to address cancer inequalities described above and also to ensure the following:

- x Cancer sign and symptom awareness should be linked to cancer outcomes. Targeted cancer information and support should be developed which effectively increases cancer awareness among lower socio-economic groups. Good practice should also be developed regarding the provision of information and support to those groups with the highest cancer incidence and outcomes.
- x Research should be undertaken to understand which interventions are successful in bringing about behaviour change, particularly among lower socioeconomic groups. Campaigns and health programmes should be developed which specifically aim to reduce the incidence of risky behaviours among these groups.
- x Health Care professionals should be equipped with the skills required to effectively communicate cancer information with a range of communities and individuals. Research could be undertaken to explore gaps in the communication skills of health professionals and, if required, provide training to fill such gaps.
- x Underlying factors, such as poverty, can influence individual's health. Government policy needs to address such issues if health inequalities are to be addressed.

For more information contact Cancer Research UK's Policy and Public Affairs team on 020 7061 8360 or publicaffairs@cancer.org.uk

References

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