

Letter to the Editor

REDUCING THE RISK THRESHOLDS FOR URGENT CANCER INVESTIGATION - A MIGHTY CHALLENGE BUT POTENTIALLY LIFESAVING FOR THOUSANDS: A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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Cancer is the uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells that can arise anywhere in the body as a result of mutational or chromosomal changes or abnormalities, can produce massive growths, locally invade surrounding tissues and spread to other body parts, making it one of the leading cause of death worldwide. One of the factors that make cancer exceptionally deadly is its late diagnosis when considerable growth or spread has already occurred.¹ Effort to diagnose and begin palliative care of cancer earlier on in its timeline provides us an opportunity to decrease cancer morbidity and mortality.² A study conducted by Moore SF, et al. in 2021 aimed to determine the effect that decreasing the threshold for declaring cancer as a potential risk has on the number of patients that become eligible to receive urgent care.³

Results of the study showed, not surprisingly, that considerably more patients qualified for investigations when risk thresholds were reduced by 1% and exceedingly more when reduced by 2%. These patients would normally have been overlooked and would not have been dealt with the priority they had been now assigned; considering them high risk as well. Additionally, studies have shown increased cancer referral rate to be directly linked to decreased cancer mortality.⁴

However, with so many people now having to undergo rigorous testing to diagnose possible cancers, the question arises whether it is worthwhile to agree to spend more money and resources on seemingly low-risk patients and subsequently, impose further burdens on healthcare systems that may already be struggling financially.

Unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis have lost their lives to this notorious malady in just the past year and with the numbers rising⁵, the idea of including even the low-risk patients in urgent investigative protocols for early determination of the presence, type, nature, and severity of cancers sounds particularly promising in providing the ones at risk a forewarning much earlier in the course of the disease which can ultimately alleviate much of the morbidity and even save lives in the thousands. Efforts must be made, of course, to make such investigational programs more efficient, for instance by targeting cancers more common in Pakistan and decreasing risk thresholds just moderately to realistically account for the limitations of our healthcare system.

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