

# Report predicts four in every ten Britons will develop cancer

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Cases of cancer in Britain are rising at an alarming rate, according to a recent study by the Cancer Research Campaign. Four out of every 10 people will develop cancer at some point in their lives—41 percent of men and 38 percent of women—based on 1996 figures. This is an almost 7 percent rise from the 1981 figures of 32 percent of men and 31 percent of women.

Britain has one of the worst survival rates for cancer in the developed world. Health experts maintain that 25,000 preventable British cancer deaths occur each year.

Health Secretary Alan Milburn has announced an extra £100 million for new diagnostic and radiotherapy equipment, and pledged to make the fight against the disease a “personal priority” in order to produce a “ten year turnaround”. This did little to impress the medical community and the many charities involved in fighting cancer. The consensus amongst doctors and health experts is that this sum is wholly inadequate, as it starts from an already under-funded system.

Two European comparisons illustrate the poor state of health provision in Britain. The UK would need to double the number of cancer consultants in order to reach the present standard in neighbouring France, which has faced its own recent curtailment of health care. The comparison with Germany is even more revealing. In Britain, the annual average spent on health care is £1,000 per person (a sixth of which is privately funded). In Germany, the figure is £1,600 per person on the basis of a compulsory health insurance system that covers 90 percent of the population. In Britain, only 13 percent, or 6 million people, have private insurance.

The under-funding of the health service affects both the prevention and treatment of cancer. It is the primary cause of the high number of cancer deaths alongside other factors such as poor diet, smoking and

widespread industrial pollution. As with cancer, heart disease is a bigger killer in Britain than anywhere else in the developed world. Britain also has one of the worst death rates from circulatory disease in under 65-year-olds.

Paradoxically, the greatest recent advances in cancer research have been made in Britain. The Institute of Cancer Research in London is Europe's largest research centre. It has mapped and cloned more cancer genes than anywhere else in the world. The ability to arrest and control the disease is increasing at an unprecedented rate.

Gordon McVie, director general of the Cancer Research Campaign, believes there is great hope on the horizon in the shape of new cures and treatments, many of them resulting from the rapidly expanding field of genetic research. “I believe that, were I to live for another 50 years, there would be no job for me and no need for the Cancer Research Campaign,” he said. “Cancer may not be cured by 2050 but it will be beaten and the disease will be as readily controlled as diabetes is today.”

In light of the scientific and medical advances made over the past two decades, such optimism regarding humanity's ability to defeat cancer would appear well founded. At every stage, however, the possibilities opened up by these advances are being denied to millions of people as a result of the drive to slash state spending and boost the profits of the major corporations being carried out by governments in Britain and throughout the world.



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