

## November is Pancreatic Cancer Awareness Month

November is the Pancreatic cancer awareness month. In fact this month is designated as the awareness month for three deadly cancers with a total annual mortality rate that exceeds 220,000 deaths per year. The month designation for cancer awareness is not based on how many people die of that disease; I don't know how that is done.

Because three deadly cancers are honored in one month, I feel it is appropriate that each of those cancers gets special attention from us. Last week I wrote a blog on the Gabrail Cancer Center website about gastric cancer. This week it is about pancreatic cancer and next week will be about lung cancer.

It is estimated that 43,920 men and women (22,090 men and 21,830 women) will be diagnosed with and 37,390 men and women will die of **cancer of the pancreas** in 2012. To put things in perspective, 34,000 breast cancer patients die of their disease annually. Meaning, more Americans die every year of pancreatic cancer than from breast cancer, yet public awareness and research funding for this disease fall short of most other cancers when adjusted to death rate.

Pancreatic cancer afflicts women and men mostly in their 50s but no age is immune from this evil disease that has defied the medical profession. The reason that this disease is deadly more than 97% of the time is due to late diagnosis. We are yet to discover the methods and means to diagnose pancreatic cancer at a surgically curable stage. Clinical and basic research holds such a promise. Such research requires government and private funding which can only be augmented through public awareness.

One of our dear breast cancer patients who survived her disease to see her husband die of pancreatic cancer at the age of 52 was upset to notice the lack of awareness about pancreatic cancer. She was dismayed that breast cancer that afflicted her gets disproportional attention from the media and government funding for research. Nancy decided to donate a sizable amount of money in support of pancreatic cancer research as well as helping the victims of this disease while fighting their fight.

The symptoms of pancreatic cancer are usually subtle and insidious because of its geographic location; hence, the vast majority of patients are diagnosed at a late stage when cure is a dream. Occasionally, the cancer arises in the Ampulla of Vater, which causes jaundice. Those are the rare occasions when surgical resection offers some hope for cure. The usual symptoms of advanced disease at diagnosis are new onset diabetes in someone who doesn't have a family history of diabetes, weight loss, poor appetite and abdominal and back pain.

There is no blood test or imaging technology that can help detect pancreatic cancer early enough. Most pancreatic cancer cases are sporadic (non-inherited), although, there are a few families that seem to harbor a mutated gene. A high-profile case that brought media attention to the genetic bases of such rare cases was that of President Jimmy Carter's family.

We don't know what causes this cancer. There is no proof that diet, smoking or any other habit contributes to the cause of pancreatic cancer, we simply don't know.

The treatment is usually palliative to relieve symptoms and maybe prolong life. Surgery is sometimes attempted when there is a reason to believe that it is early stage enough that it can be removed surgically. Unfortunately, most of such patients end up having a disease found to be not resectable at the time of surgery. Radiation and chemotherapy are often given to relieve symptoms and prolong life.

The fight against this and other cancers continues through basic science and clinical research.