Screening for cancer: Does it make sense?

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The key to successful treatment of any cancer is early diagnosis. This can only take place if all of us are aware of the symptoms and consult a doctor at the first sign of a possible problem. Bowel cancer awareness is especially important because it is more treatable than most cancers.

Screening is encouraged

According to Cancer Research UK, half the patients diagnosed this year with bowel cancer are likely to live for at least another 10 years. It is also one of only three cancers where regular screening is actively encouraged by the government and professional bodies. The other two are cervical and breast cancer.

The fact that routine screening is not more widely recommended may seem strange, but, while screening can save lives, it can also lead to unnecessary and potentially dangerous treatments involving surgery, high dose radiation and toxic drugs - treatments that may scar and damage bodies and increase the risk of contracting cancer.

Why does more routine screening not take place?

At the heart of the problem is our justifiable fear of cancer. This can cause us to ignore the problem until it is too late, but also to demand that it be got rid of in all circumstances once we know we have it. We should learn to be intelligently aware. Aware of symptoms, aware of when screening is advisable and aware of the risks and benefits of treatment if cancer is diagnosed.

It may have escaped your notice, but April was bowel cancer awareness month. Health awareness days, months or years are so common nowadays that we often fail to think about the targeted condition, but in regard to cancer, and bowel cancer in particular, that would be a mistake.

Bowel cancer is number four on the list of common cancers and the early indicator is blood in stools. Anyone noticing this symptom should see a doctor immediately, but small traces of blood are unlikely to be detected and this is why screening is recommended.

What does screening involve?

Bowel scope screening checks for the presence of small growths called polyps. Statistically, only one in ten polyps will become cancerous, but removing them is easy, painless and does not involve invasive surgery. As bowel cancer is so preventable, the NHS plans to offer everyone reaching 55 direct access to bowel scope screening by 2016.
Issues for employers

Do employers need to get involved when a private health screen by one of the two main providers, Bupa and Nuffield, is likely to cost in excess of £400? Maybe not for all employees, but there are a few additional things to consider.

Cancer is not the only area of health where screening can be useful. Checks for diabetes, high blood pressure, and excessive levels of cholesterol are all recommended by experts, but frequently neglected by busy people. Similarly, most of us could benefit from advice on our personal risks for various diseases and what we can do to help avoid them.

Employers offering private screening are not only sending a message that they care about the wellbeing of their employees, but are also ensuring that take up is better when comprehensive screening is offered. After all, one half day away from work every two years is better than several to fit in with the various NHS programmes. In addition, specific health screenings options such as skin, bowel, breast etc. are becoming a popular choice as a flexible benefit. The increased demand for these screenings is due to increased awareness of the need for early detection, affordability through salary sacrifice schemes and convenience. Some screenings can be done from home or via on site screening days at work.

Find out more

If you would like to discuss the content of this briefing note and how it could impact your organisation, please contact your consultant or:

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