Improving survival rates for oesophageal cancer

A trial conducted by the MRC Clinical Trials Unit has demonstrated that pre-operative chemotherapy compared to surgery alone improves two-year survival rates for oesophageal cancer by 26 per cent.

Oesophageal cancer is the ninth most common type of cancer in the UK, with more than 8,000 new cases diagnosed each year. Oesophageal cancer does not usually cause any noticeable symptoms until the cancer has spread beyond the oesophagus and into nearby tissue. For this reason it can be more difficult to cure compared with other types of cancer. On average, 30 per cent of people with oesophageal cancer will live for one year after the diagnosis, and eight per cent will live for five years after the diagnosis.

Surgery

In the early 1990s, people with cancer of the oesophagus were offered an operation to try to cure their cancer. Unfortunately, this was only successful for a small group of people, and only about one in every five people lived for more than two years after the operation.

Chemotherapy

Some small clinical trials had suggested that it might be helpful to give people chemotherapy before their operation — it seemed that this might help more people to live for longer. To test whether this was the case, in 1992 researchers at the MRC Clinical Trials Unit developed the OE02 trial, comparing two treatments for cancer of the oesophagus — an operation or chemotherapy followed by an operation.

The trial closed in 1998 having recruited 802 patients from the United Kingdom and European centres. The initial results were published in 2002, following up on each patient after an average time of 17 months. The trial showed that both disease-free and overall survival rates were significantly increased after preoperative chemotherapy. The two-year survival rate was 43 per cent in the chemotherapy group compared to 34 per cent in the surgery alone group.

Clinical guidelines

Treating oesophageal cancer patients with chemotherapy before surgery is now advised in clinical guidelines as the standard treatment approach and has since changed clinical practice.

Impact summary

There are more than 8,000 new cases of oesophageal cancer diagnosed each year.

On average, only 30 per cent of people with oesophageal cancer live for one year after the diagnosis.

The MRC Clinical Trials Unit developed a test comparing two treatments — an operation, or chemotherapy followed by an operation.

The trial found that the two-year survival rate was 43 per cent for those who had had pre-operative chemotherapy compared to 34 per cent in the surgery group alone.

1 http://www.nhs.uk