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TOPIC: HEALTH/DISEASES

Should cancer be a notifiable disease?

Debate on Making Cancer a Notifiable Disease

- There is an ongoing debate on whether cancer should be designated as a notifiable disease in India.
- Proponents argue that making cancer notifiable could improve surveillance and facilitate early detection, thereby helping to track trends and allocate resources more effectively.
- On the other hand, the Union government contends that notification typically applies to infectious diseases and that cancer, being a non-communicable and non-contagious disease, does not fit the criteria for mandatory reporting.
- Recent shifts in disease notification policies, such as the inclusion of snakebites in the list of notifiable diseases in 2024, raise questions about the traditional reasoning behind the notifiable disease classification.

Purpose of Disease Notification

- Disease notification ensures the prompt reporting of infectious diseases, allowing public health authorities to take swift action to prevent outbreaks, contain spread, and mitigate risks to public health.
- Under the notification system, doctors are legally obligated to report notifiable diseases, and failure to do so can result in legal consequences, highlighting the importance of timely reporting for the benefit of public health.
- Cancer, however, does not require immediate containment actions as it is not contagious. It typically involves long-term treatment and management rather than urgent intervention, making it different from the diseases typically classified as notifiable.

Concerns with Making Cancer Notifiable

- Cancer is a complex group of diseases that includes a wide range of conditions, from benign to malignant forms, making it difficult to create a standardized notification protocol.
- Notifiability implies the need for immediate action, but cancer treatment generally requires ongoing, long-term management rather than a quick public health response, which complicates its inclusion in the notification system.
- Imposing mandatory reporting for cancer may unnecessarily increase the administrative burden on healthcare professionals without significantly improving patient outcomes or the quality of care.

Existing Cancer Surveillance Mechanism



- India already has a National Cancer Registry Programme (NCRP) in place, which has been collecting cancer data since 1982 to monitor cancer prevalence and trends.
- The NCRP includes both hospital-based registries (269 hospitals) and population-based registries (38 regions) as of 2022, but the coverage is not comprehensive.
- The current registries have gaps in coverage, and there is a need for expansion to include all hospitals treating cancer patients, especially district headquarters hospitals, to ensure a more complete picture of cancer statistics across the country.

Privacy and Stigma Concerns

- Notifiable diseases generally prioritize public health over individual patient privacy, meaning that information regarding cases of cancer may be disclosed to authorities without the patient's explicit consent.
- Cancer, however, carries significant social stigma, which could discourage individuals from seeking timely treatment if they fear that their condition will be publicly reported or subjected to mandatory notification.
- Legal provisions within public health acts could be misused, potentially compromising patient privacy, and further deterring people from getting diagnosed or seeking treatment in a timely manner.

Alternative Approach to Strengthen Cancer Surveillance

- A more effective approach to cancer surveillance could involve expanding the National Cancer Registry Programme (NCRP) to include all tertiary care and district hospitals, which would improve the quality and reach of cancer data collection.
- Strengthening cancer screening programs, particularly in high-risk populations and underserved regions, can aid in the early detection of cancers, thus improving outcomes and reducing treatment costs over time.
- Encouraging voluntary reporting by oncologists and healthcare providers would help ensure accurate and comprehensive data collection while avoiding the need for legal mandates or administrative burdens.
- A structured cancer registry system that includes participation from private hospitals and ensures better follow-up mechanisms would be a more efficient and sustainable approach to enhancing cancer surveillance, as opposed to mandatory notification.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/should-cancer-be-a-notifiable-disease/article69336747.ece#:~:text=Time%20and%20again%2C%20there,non%2Dcommunicable%20and%20not%20infectious.>