The role of cancer research in noncommunicable disease control

Cancer control needs a targeted approach on a regional basis in order to effectively reduce the burden of disease, according to a commentary published in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute on 10 July.

In September 2011, the United Nations General Assembly held a high-level meeting on noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) that focused on four major contributors to the global burden of disease: cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes. The outcome of the meeting was a Political Declaration that highlights the need for prevention of NCDs.

Dr Christopher Wild, the Director of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), states in the commentary that cancer differs from other NCDs in critical ways and therefore requires a more nuanced approach to prevention and control. The heterogeneous geographical distribution of cancer and the range of risk factors mean that a cancer-specific response is needed that is tailored to different geographical regions, writes Dr Wild. In particular, attention should be focused on cancer in low- and middle-income countries.

Proposed strategies for control of noncommunicable diseases focus mainly on the shared risk factors of tobacco and alcohol use, physical inactivity, and unhealthy diet. In the commentary, Dr Wild identifies four additional interventions as high priorities for cancer control: hepatitis B virus (HBV) vaccination, human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination, cervical cancer screening, and early detection of breast cancer.

Dr Wild also suggests areas where cancer research can provide the evidence base for cancer control and stresses the need for global cooperation in developing a research agenda for low- and middle-income countries. Dr Wild states that the professional cancer research community should be engaged in the NCD political process to ensure that the best evidence base is used and to shape the future priorities for research internationally.

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Advance Access First published online: July 10, 2012