July 2012

Policy Statement

Radiotherapy: awareness

This policy statement aims to provide an overview of Cancer Research UK’s position on public awareness of radiotherapy. It is one of a number of policy statements on radiotherapy which explore different issues in detail.

Background

Public awareness of radiotherapy is low and a number of misconceptions about the treatment persist. A YouGov survey of over 2,000 people in 2010 showed that only one in ten people know that radiotherapy helps cure 40% of cancer patients and just 14% are aware that up to half of all cancer patients could benefit from radiotherapy as part of their treatment. Fewer than one in ten members of the public think that radiotherapy is a modern, cutting-edge treatment. Additionally, people still fear the treatment, with 40 per cent of people describing radiotherapy as “frightening”.

The survey was repeated at the end of 2011, suggesting that there had been some positive changes in public perceptions of radiotherapy, however there is still a long way to go.

Furthermore, there is evidence that primary care professionals’ awareness of how far the treatment has come over the last two decades is also low.

Despite the fact that radiotherapy cures more cases of cancer than chemotherapy, cancer drugs have a much higher profile. This is due to a number of factors. For example, the concept of taking a drug is a familiar one, whereas radiotherapy is delivered using unfamiliar machinery and hidden away in bunkers or at the back of hospitals. Similarly, cancer drugs receive a lot of media attention, partly because pharmaceutical companies invest significantly in the marketing of their products.

Raising Awareness

We welcome the Government’s investment in the National Radiotherapy Awareness Initiative to help inform and improve public attitudes and beliefs about radiotherapy. This is crucial to ensuring that all patients understand the importance of radiotherapy and are in a position to make an informed choice about their cancer care. The initiative must be a long term endeavour.

Cancer Research UK is working with the National Cancer Action team and other stakeholders involved in the delivery of radiotherapy on the National Radiotherapy Awareness Initiative to continue to raise awareness of this important treatment.

Raising awareness could also bring other benefits, for example by highlighting the radiotherapy profession as a rewarding career path.

The Year of Radiotherapy
2011 was the Year of Radiotherapy, celebrating one hundred years since Marie Curie won her second Nobel Prize for research into radium, establishing her position as a pioneer in the field of radiotherapy.

The main messages of the year were that:
- Radiotherapy is cutting edge
- Radiotherapy is cost-effective
- Radiotherapy cures cancer

Cancer Research UK believes that it is essential that the progress made on awareness of radiotherapy in 2011 should be built on into the future.

For more information, please contact Cancer Research UK’s Policy and Public Affairs team on 020 3469 8360 or publicaffairs@cancer.org.uk.


2 YouGov Plc 2010 Public Attitudes Towards Radiotherapy: a survey for Cancer Research UK