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Advice on Health (No. 125)

CANCER: Delay In Treatment

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. H. B. TURBOTT, Director of the Division of School Hygiene, Health Department)

TO bring the cancer death rate down—it ranks second in New Zealand—people should know the reasons for the continued high incidence. To give modern curative methods hope of success, treatment of cancer must be early and adequate. Everybody—this means you and me—must be aware of the possibility of cancer, especially from middle years of life onwards. Everyone must keep close watch on himself for early signs and symptoms. The doctor to whom we take our early doubts must employ all steps necessary to make a prompt diagnosis—if he misses out some modern aid such as an early X-ray and just reassures us without full investigation, he may miss the chance of saving our lives. Should the doctor, on the other hand, confirm our dawning suspicions, we on our side must lose no time in undergoing any modern treatment with reasonable hope of success. That treatment should be adequate—as adequate as modern specialisation can make it. Our cancer clinics exist to see that the best in medical science is available to those who report early enough.

In these things—the patient reporting signs and symptoms early, the doctor diagnosing promptly, and both losing no time once the diagnosis is made, and adequate treatment—in these four things, I repeat, lie our hopes of curing cancer while the disease is still limited and localised.

Reasons for Delay

Let's examine the situation. Does the patient unduly delay between the onset of symptoms and the first visit to the doctor? A series of cases recently checked showed that eight patients out of 10 held back too long after initial symptoms occurred. Some because they thought their symptoms were "not serious enough"; some because they hadn't enough knowledge to know their serious nature; some delayed till their economic affairs were settled. The first reason was more common—folk put off going to the doctor because they didn't attach sufficient importance to signs and symptoms that should have suggested cancer to them.

The Doctors Can Help

Now what about the doctor diagnosing promptly? It must be admitted that the series of cases mentioned above showed that medical delay in making a diagnosis happened in a proportion of cases, especially in cancer of the internal organs. It was due to the failure to have X-ray or other modern diagnostic procedures carried out. In general practice, people are always plaguing doctors with their functional disorders—troubles real enough to the patient but of no great organic significance. Many of the early symptoms of internal organ cancers are difficult to distinguish from such functional troubles—but they shouldn't be put down as functional until full investigation by scientific methods has been made. This is where doctors can help to reduce cancer incidence—by neglecting no known diagnostic procedure. Of course, some cancers are so insidious in their onset that early diagnosis and successful treatment are alike impossible.

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A LITTLE LESS

BELL TEA

GOES A LOT FURTHER