In the news

SCREENING SAVES LIVES

A single 5 minute test for bowel cancer could save thousands of lives by detecting early cancerous polyps, prompting researchers to argue that it should be incorporated into current screening programmes.

These findings were published in *The Lancet* by a team at Imperial College, London, UK, who examined 200,000 participants aged 55–64 over 10 years. They found that sigmoidoscopy — the insertion of a small flexible camera probe into the lower bowel — reduced bowel cancer deaths by 43%. Bowel cancer kills 16,000 people every year in the United Kingdom, and these results suggest that incorporating sigmoidoscopy into current screening procedures could save 3,000 lives per year. Lead researcher of the study, Wendy Atkin, said “Our study shows for the first time that we could dramatically reduce the incidence of bowel cancer and the number of people dying from the disease by using this one-off test” (*The Telegraph*, 28 Apr 2010).

Current testing involves looking for traces of blood in stool samples, and then referring the patient for follow-up screening, usually colonoscopy. Colonoscopy needs a specialized doctor, and is an invasive and lengthy procedure that requires sedation. By contrast, sigmoidoscopy can be carried out by a nurse, takes only 5 minutes and is painless. Generally, it has been assumed that people would be reluctant to participate in a bowel examination, but this was not the case: “Most people thought the whole examination procedure was absolutely fantastic”, said Jane Wardle, director of Cancer Research UK’s health behaviour centre (*The Guardian*, 28 Apr 2010).

“We don’t often use the word breakthrough but this is an occasion when I will”, said Harpal Kumar, head of Cancer Research UK, the organization that helped fund this research (*The Independent*, 27 Apr 2010).

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