SURGICAL ONCOLOGY

Good things don't come to those who watchfully wait

Prostate cancer is the world's second leading cause of cancer mortality in men. However, the now wide use of the prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test, the refined surgical and radiation techniques, and recently developed hormone therapies, have helped to increase the life expectancy for men with this disease.

After reporting in 2008 that radical prostatectomy improved prostate cancer survival compared with watchful-waiting after 10-year follow-up, the Scandinavian Prostate Cancer Group Study 4 (SPCG-4) was interested in whether the absolute and relative benefits of surgical treatment would increase during longer follow up: would overall mortality remain reduced? Would the benefit be larger among younger than among older patients? The latest report from SPCG-4 has provided evidence that

radical prostatectomy reduces the rate of death from prostate cancer and the risk of metastases, especially in men younger than 65 years of age, after a 15-year follow up.

A total of 695 men with early-stage prostate cancer were enrolled in the study, 347 of whom were randomly assigned to the radical prostatectomy group and 448 to the watchful-waiting group. All the patients included in the study had PSA levels of less than 50 ng/ml and negative bone scans. Patients were followed every 6 months for the first 2 years and annually thereafter, and if signs of local recurrence and bone metastases appeared, these were treated with hormone therapy in both groups.

The cumulative incidence of metastases since the SPCG-4 study was initiated in 1989, was 21.7% in the radical prostatectomy group and 33.4% in the watchful-waiting group. By the end of 2009, 55 men in the radical prostatectomy

group and 81 in the watchful-waiting group had died of prostate cancer. In conclusion, benefits of radical prostatectomy continue to be seen beyond 10 years. Further studies will be needed to confirm why this significant benefit does not extend to men older than 65 years of age.

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