

Cancer Survival in Germany after the fall of the Iron Curtain

Two decades after the fall of the Wall, cancer survival rates in East and West Germany have become almost equal. This is reported in a recent study by a team of epidemiologists from the German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ) and eleven German cancer registries.

Data from the 1970s and 1980s show that people affected by cancer survived significantly longer in West Germany than cancer patients behind the Iron Curtain. Looking at a diagnosis period from 1984 to 1985 in the former German Democratic Republic, 28 percent of colorectal cancer patients, 46 percent of prostate cancer patients, and 52 percent of breast cancer patients survived the first five years after diagnosis. By contrast, 5-year survival rates for people in West Germany affected by these types of cancer were 44 percent, 68 percent, and 68 percent in the years from 1979 to 1983 already.

Led by Dr. Lina Jansen and Prof. Hermann Brenner from the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ), a team of scientists from DKFZ and the Association of Population-based Cancer Registries in Germany (GEKID) has now studied for the first time how survival rates developed in Germany in the second decade after Germany's reunification. The new study is based on over one million cancer cases from Germany's eleven population-based state cancer registries, which covered approximately 40 percent of the German population in the period studied.

The group analyzed cancer survival rates in the years from 2002 to 2006. They found that 5-year survival rates for 20 out of 25 cancer types differed by less than three percent between East and West and may therefore be regarded as almost identical.

Only for cancers of the oral cavity, the esophagus and the gall bladder as well as for melanoma, cancer patients in former West German states had statistically significantly higher 5-year survival rates. On the other hand, people living in the former East German states had a slight survival advantage for leukemias.

"The fact that cancer survival rates have aligned in the former West and East German states demonstrates that the standardized health system has created comparable health chances for people in the East and in the West. The dramatic differences in cancer survival rates have almost entirely disappeared, even though economic conditions continue to be different," says Hermann Brenner. "However, it makes more sense now to compare socio-economic differences within individual regions than to think in those obsolete categories of East and West."

Lina Jansen, Adam Gondos, Andrea Eberle, Katharina Emrich, Bernd Holleczeck, Alexander Katalinic, Hermann Brenner and GEKID's Cancer Survival Working Group: Cancer survival in Eastern and Western Germany after the fall of the Iron Curtain. *European Journal of Epidemiology* 2012, DOI: 10.1007/s10654-012-9723-5

The German Cancer Research Center (Deutsches Krebsforschungszentrum, DKFZ) with its more than 2,500 employees is the largest biomedical research institute in Germany. At DKFZ, more than 1,000 scientists investigate how cancer develops, identify cancer risk factors and endeavor to find new strategies to prevent people from getting cancer. They develop novel approaches to make tumor diagnosis more precise and treatment of cancer patients more successful. Jointly with Heidelberg University Hospital, DKFZ has established the National Center for Tumor Diseases (NCT) Heidelberg where promising approaches from cancer research are translated into the clinic. The staff of the Cancer Information Service (KID) offers information about the

widespread disease of cancer for patients, their families, and the general public. The center is a member of the Helmholtz Association of National Research Centers. Ninety percent of its funding comes from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and the remaining ten percent from the State of Baden-Württemberg.

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