



Men's health matters too

→ Kathy Redmond ■ EDITOR

Europe's women are much more likely to survive a cancer diagnosis than their male counterparts. According to EURO CARE-4, after adjusting for age and case mix, 54.6% of the women diagnosed between 1995 and 1999 survived for at least five years, but only 44.8% of men. The gap is the more worrying because, while differences in survival rates between countries have shown a welcome decrease since EURO CARE-3 (patients diagnosed 1990–1994), the gender gap has remained exactly the same, at 11.4 percentage points.

Perhaps we should not be surprised. The between-country data from EURO CARE-3 was effectively used to pressure governments to take action to improve their performance. The data on the survival gap between men and women, in contrast, barely merited comment. Publication of the EURO CARE-4 results last August offered a second chance to draw attention to this major disparity – but yet again it seems to have passed unnoticed. Why is this? Is there an assumption that nothing can be done? Or is it simply not seen as a priority?

Evidence that might explain the gender survival gap is patchy at best. Differences in tumour biology or host defence mechanisms may work against men; women may be diagnosed earlier or treated better. SEER data from the US show similar five-year survival rates between men and women – 64.6% for men and 65.2% for

women – suggesting that biology may not play the major role here. Issues surrounding delays in presentation, however, are attracting increasing interest among the small but growing band of European researchers specialising in men's health. Men are known to be less likely to engage in self-examination, and less able to recognise cancer warning signs. They are also more likely to delay reporting symptoms. Part of this may be social pressures – macho men don't seek help. It could also be that women are simply more used to going to the doctor – for themselves or their children – and are more used to discussing intimate health concerns.

It seems ironic that, while women's health outcomes are so much better than men's, women's health issues receive so much more attention. It is time to change this in cancer, and more coherent policies on tackling cancer in men are required. The UK's Men's Health Forum has taken a lead in flagging up how this might be done (<http://tinyurl.com/32eoy9>).

Finding better ways to communicate with men could help raise awareness of cancer warning signs. Finding the right settings to offer them advice and health checks could also make a difference. An examination of practices in countries with little or no survival gap between the sexes would help throw light on what works well.

Above all, the European cancer community must state clearly that this gender gap is not acceptable, and action is needed to end it.