

Vasectomy and cancer

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Background

Vasectomy is among the most effective methods of fertility control. Some 50 million couples worldwide currently use this method.

Recently, some epidemiological studies conducted in the USA and United Kingdom have suggested that vasectomy may be associated with an increased risk of cancer of the prostate and testis. Others studies, however, have not found any increase in risk.

Given that a large number of men currently use this method and the fact that prostate cancer accounts for a substantial number of deaths among older men, any uncertainty about safety of vasectomy is a matter of serious concern. Although cancer of the testis is much less common, any increase in its incidence due to vasectomy would still be unacceptable.

Meeting of experts

On 24–25 October 1991, the Special Programme held a meeting of 23 experts from five developed and five developing countries to examine the studies linking vasectomy with cancer. After an exten-

sive review of the available data, the experts concluded that:

—it is unlikely that there is any causal relationship between vasectomy and the risk of cancer of the prostate or testis

—no changes in family planning policies concerning vasectomy are warranted.

The Group also set out priorities for further research. For cancer of the prostate, it recommended that epidemiological investigations should take priority over basic science research as there was no compelling hypothesis to explain the suggested link between this cancer and vasectomy.

As to testicular cancer, since there is also no evidence for a link between this cancer and vasectomy and because of a lack of any biological basis for an association between the two, the Group did not see a need to start new epidemiological studies until results from those currently under way become available.

The background papers prepared for this meeting are to be published in the *European journal of cancer*.



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