

# Britons playing a lethal Cancer Ignorance Game

**D**URING the past 15 years deaths in England and Wales resulting from cancer have exceeded 1,500,000 — more than five times the population of Cardiff.

But it is no medical secret that a significant proportion of these deaths could have been prevented, with the patients being cured and able to live normal lives. A vital factor with cancer has always been early detection.

It is now possible for doctors to detect certain cancers even before they cause symptoms — this means when the patient is unaware that anything is wrong.

Despite the rapid advances in medical science, the annual cancer death toll has remained almost constant at its same high level for many years. Yet there have been changes: deaths from certain types of cancer, such as those affecting the skin, nose and neck, have decreased, while others, such as lung cancer, have increased.

## Ignorance

Cancer thrives on ignorance and fear among the public, and until these obstacles are overcome medical authorities see small chance of any drastic reduction in the overall deaths.

What can be done to eradicate this fear and ignorance? This problem has been tackled, with a measure of success, by cancer "education" organisations throughout Britain. Their methods have included the use of mobile clinics, posters and lectures.

**JOHN OWEN-DAVIES** reports on a new attempt by the Welsh charity, Tenovus, to end the built-in resistance to recognising the reality of cancer.

But a recently published report sponsored by the Cardiff-based charity Tenovus suggests that methods at present being used are unlikely to succeed as the public has a "built-in resistance" both to the approach and "to wishing to recognise the reality of cancer."

In short, cancer has become a "dirty" word only to be muttered in the company of friends and behind closed hands.

Dr. Ruth Salzberger, Gulbenkian Research Fellow at Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, spent three-and-a-half years in two Cambridgeshire villages to produce the report, entitled *Cancer: Attitudes and Social Action*.

Much has been written on public attitudes to cancer, but this is probably the first report which has really penetrated the surface of human personality and individual aspirations and fears.

During her time in the villages Dr. Salzberger achieved a rare social privilege for a scientist in that she was "accepted" as a person, and confidante by the local inhabitants. This factor alone makes up for the deficiency in numbers of people who were involved in the study.

In her report Dr. Salzberger puts forward a "blueprint," which she believes will be successful in per-

suading people to seek early detection of cancer and thus reduce the number of deaths.

She stresses the need for educational programmes in schools on human biology and personal relationships "These programmes," she says, "need to be an accepted part of school curricula."

"The Department of Education and Science should ensure that courses in colleges of education and elsewhere are geared to producing teachers trained and orientated to achieve this programme."

## Disturbed

She also says there is a need for a change in the "body-mind" relationship, both on the part of the general public and medical and para-medical staff.

Dr. Salzberger has brought to light a lethal "game" which is being played throughout Britain. It is called The Cancer Ignorance Game, and is played by two people, subconsciously, one of whom is a health educator.

She gives an example: "The Women's Institute of one of the villages requested an illustrated lecture on cancer; just before the speaker was due to come the

institute's president wrote an apologetic letter saying that members were 'disturbed about having a talk on cancer education' and urged her to inform the speaker that they 'would rather not hear anything.' The talk was therefore cancelled.

At another meeting where the County Health Educator spoke on cancer the president had to apologise for the small number of people who turned up.

How do people first hear about cancer? This was incorporated in a questionnaire given to women attending a mobile clinic. "Newspapers, periodicals and books" were the most common answers. At the bottom of the list, which included "conversation," "television," and "school," was "posters." This would tend to vindicate Dr. Salzberger's opinion about "built-in resistance" to present education methods.

Perhaps the answer lies in what one Cambridgeshire man told Dr. Salzberger: "You want to know how I have managed to live so well? I used to drink and smoke and come home in the early hours of the morning when I was a lad, but I gave that up."

"I married a good woman and when I saw how she managed I gave her all the money I earned. We brought up two boys. I have worked on the farm all my life, but at half past nine in the evening I am in bed. I thought about my health and I looked after it."

Dr. Salzberger's report is one of several on cancer being sponsored by Tenovus. During the past eight years the organisation has raised over £3m. for cancer research projects covering a wide spectrum of investigation.