

Public Statement Regarding Vasectomy and Prostate Cancer

The February 17th 1993 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association includes two reports of research regarding vasectomy and prostate cancer. The research, conducted by Giovannucci at Harvard Medical School, found in patients studied that vasectomy was associated with a small increased risk of prostate cancer.

Although the relationship between prostate cancer and vasectomy was weak: in these studies, the findings are still noteworthy and should not be ignored. Neither should the public nor medical professional overreact to this new information.

Review of Other Large Studies

To best understand the new studies, they must be viewed in light of other similar research on this topic. Two other large studies of similar design conducted in the United States have yielded information on vasectomy, prostate cancer and other medical conditions. Both of these long term studies were highly reassuring about the safety of vasectomy, not only in terms of prostate cancer but also in regards to other conditions.

In a Kaiser Permanente Health Care member, Stephen Sydney and his colleagues found no increased risk of prostate cancer among vasectomized men. In a study conducted in four cities, Frank J. Massey from the University of California at Los Angeles and his colleagues found a reduced risk in prostate cancer among vasectomized men.

The two new studies reported in the Journal of American Medical Association found only a small increased risk for prostate cancer among vasectomized men. Medical researchers interpret such a small increase as a weak: association that may be due to chance or bias.

Biologic Mechanism

Before a casual relationship can be established between any disease and a particular factor, a biologic mechanism must exist. According to Giovannucci and his colleagues, reductions in prostatic secretions or changes in the immunologic mechanism after a vasectomy could be a biologic link between vasectomy and prostate cancer. But most experts do not believe in them.

On the 1990, two other medical studies found a link between prostate cancer and vasectomy, but they involved small numbers of men, and the case-control research design has significant limitations. Nevertheless, concerns about the issue prompted the World Health Organization to convene a 1991 meeting of 23 international experts to review all research regarding vasectomy and prostate cancer. These exerts concluded that there was no plausible biologic mechanism for a relationship between vasectomy and prostate cancer. The World Health Organization has reviewed the two new Giovannucci studies and has concluded that vasectomy should still be offered to men, provided men receive the appropriate information regarding the risks and benefit of the procedure.

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