

Cancer in the workplace: Overview of the future of cancer care

WillisTowersWatson 

Article 1 of 7

This series of articles will explore some of the key innovations in oncology that are expected to turn the tide in the fight against cancer. They will also review the impact of these advances on employee benefit plans that often include cancer related coverage.

What the series will cover:

We will start by exploring why innovation is happening in this field and outlining the progress of current breakthroughs, followed by a review of what to expect in the future and the value of new advances in cancer care to insured employee benefits. We will also review the impact of COVID-19 on cancer services including screening, diagnoses and treatment.

Key points

- More than quarter of all deaths in the UK are caused by cancer
- Breakthroughs in cell therapy, genetics and genomics have improved the ammunition to fight this killer disease
- Innovation in detection, gene therapy, digital health and microorganisms can help make cancer a curable disease
- There is potential for these advances to reduce the cost and impact of cancer care on employee benefits

Current status of cancer

- Over the last decade our knowledge of cancers has improved significantly and with over 200 hundred different forms of cancer known today, the NHS suggests that 1 in 2 people will develop some form of cancer in their life time.
- The most common cancers in the UK are prostate, breast, bowel and lung cancer, primarily as they have the best early detection rates.
- Analysis carried out by Cancer Research UK, Macmillan Cancer Support and other cancer charities estimates that millions of people now live with cancer in the UK. Notably, an estimated 1 in 3 people living with cancer are of working age.
- As an established disease, cancer is also recognised as one of the leading causes of mortality in the UK with an estimated 450 people dying from cancer each day.
- Cancer survival varies significantly depending on the type of cancer, with some as high as 95% five-year survival and others as low as 6.5%. These rates are compounded by several factors such as the stage and progression of disease at diagnosis, genetic pre-disposition and regional access to NHS treatment and drug therapy.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, Cancer Research UK estimates that 2,300 cancer cases are likely to go undiagnosed each week as a result of the impact on cancer care services and individual behaviour.

“Before the coronavirus pandemic, the poor survival rates for common cancers in the UK was attributed by Cancer Research UK to delays in diagnosis and lack of access to optimal cancer treatment.

All of these contributing factors are being made worse by the COVID-19 crisis pandemic and the enforced policy of social distancing and are, therefore, likely to result in lower survival for patients being diagnosed with cancer during and soon after the easing of restrictions.”

Professor Gordon Wishart
Chief Medical Officer at Check4Cancer &
Visiting Professor of Cancer Surgery at Anglia Ruskin
School of Medicine

Snapshot of current breakthroughs

Surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy are mainstays of the treatment options available today, depending on the location and stage of the cancer at the time of diagnosis. Advances in research potentially offer better treatment options including the following:

- **Adoptive Cell Transfer therapies (ACT)** have shown strong results in improving the immune system's ability to fight tumour cells.
- **Gene therapy** can help target specific cancer genes, proteins and tumour tissue minimising damage to healthy cells, side effects and slowing down the growth of tumour cells.
- **Molecular profiling** of tumours to identify the specific gene fusions allows selection and tailoring of therapies to improve the effectiveness of pharmaceutical intervention.

Cancer care and employee benefits

- Progress in cancer care is important for employers. Analysis carried out by Macmillan suggests that one in three people living with cancer are of working age.
- Many employers in the UK provide employees, and in some cases dependants and families, access to some form of company health insurance plan with cancer care being a core component of the cover provided.
- Whilst being considered a chronic condition, where offered, cancer coverage within company health insurance plans can be extensive and provide faster access to cancer care services.
- Conventional cancer care has been known to severely impact the quality of life of individuals being treated, which can have a knock-on effect on productivity pre- and post-treatment.
- Over the last decade, the impact of cancer claims on company health insurance plans has been significant.
- However, as research progresses on the next generation of testing and diagnosis tools, therapies and digital health solutions, these innovations may become more cost effective and accessible for company healthcare plans to support employees.
- These services could be particularly useful as employers get accustomed to more employees working flexibly and remotely, particularly, during times of crisis such as COVID-19 and can help future proof your approach to employee health and wellbeing.
- Delays in treatment due to COVID-19 means cancers will be caught later in their progression. This has a direct cost implication in the short and medium term for employers for both healthcare and risk policies, as outcomes of late treatment could be worse. How quickly advances in treatment can offset this delay is unclear and many of the new treatments coming to market may initially be very expensive.

What to expect in the next article?

- Understanding cancers and how they occur.
- A review of why innovation is needed in oncology.
- Projections of cancer growth in coming years.
- The cost of cancer to companies and economies



To find out more information and guidance in supporting employees during the coronavirus crisis, please contact your Willis Towers Watson consulting team who can help you.

Willis Towers Watson

Willis Towers Watson, The Courtyard, Hall Lane,
Wincham, Northwich, Cheshire CW9 6DG

T 01606 352035

F 01606 330699

E enquirieshealthbenefits@willistowerswatson.com

Willis Towers Watson, 51 Lime Street, London,
EC3M 7DQ

T 0203 124 6000

F 0203 124 8223

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Registered Office: Watson House, London Road, Reigate, Surrey RH2 9PQ, United Kingdom.

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