

BEHIND THE MASK

Prostate cancer: It's all about screening

It was at once private and public. Last November, at the invitation of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, 100 members of the Israeli Knesset had their prostates checked for cancer. No world leader with prostate cancer had so inspired to do this: not Emperor Akihito, not François Mitterrand, not even Desmond Tutu.

Should we cheer? Are men ably led to defeat prostate cancer?

Not really. There is no coordinated global action on prostate cancer or, indeed, on any form of cancer. The United Nations succeeded in eliminating smallpox and has made the eradication of malaria and tuberculosis part of its Millennium Development Goals. This, even as cancer kills more than malaria and tuberculosis together.

Enter an affable Scot. His goal is to eradicate cancer from Earth. Peter Boyle directs the International Agency for Research on Cancer in Lyon, France. His argument is stark. He knows that as we live longer, cancer will happen more often. He says we're heading for a tumor tsunami. He shuttles from Krakow to Beijing to Miami warning: Stop smoking now!

As Knesset members got tested in Jerusalem, Boyle spoke in Miami. His audience was 300 men and women who will not wait for the United Nations to act. They are part of Miami's Prostate Cancer Mission.

He told us that prostate cancer is unfair. It is rare in Koreans and Japanese, but common in African Americans and Austrians. What do African Americans and Austrians share that explains this? Nobody knows. We don't know why one man or one group gets prostate cancer when another does not.

He also told us that the Tyrol, one of nine Austrian federal states, uniquely gave its residents cost-free testing with prostate-specific antigen (PSA), a blood test for early detection of prostate cancer, and digital rectal examination (DRE), the test administered in the Knesset. The Tyrol also modified prostate-cancer treatments. For example, it aggressively adopted modern American standards in prostate-cancer surgery. In the past few years, Tyrol has seen a 55-percent reduction of prostate-cancer

mortality. When is the last time you heard of a 55-percent reduction in death from any cause?

Tyrol's observation parallels an American one. Last June, a study from Seattle showed a reduction of more than 60 percent in fatal prostate cancer among men who had screening tests similar to those in the Tyrol.

Tyrol and Seattle do not answer all our questions, but they provide a cause for optimism -- they argue that in at least some populations testing and modern treatments will lower prostate-cancer deaths.

Boyle said that we are ready to solve the world's prostate-cancer problem. Shortly after he spoke, we learned that rocker Dan Fogelberg had died of prostate cancer -- at 56. Soon after that, word came that rocker Stephen Stills, 62, had been diagnosed at a curable stage. We teeter from fear to hope as Boyle's postulate is tested. We also look for what more we can do.

Recently, former Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson wrote: "The candidates [for president] should address the importance of setting goals for finding [a] cure for . . . prostate cancer." Yes, but we don't need promises. We need action. It is time for a very real gesture. And so I cast my eyes back to Zion and from there up north to Washington, D.C., and I offer what a prostate surgeon can offer. So what do you say, President Bush? Will you issue an invitation as Olmert did? If you bring the prostates, I'll bring the gloves.

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