

US cancer mortality falls for the first time

Jeanne Lenzer *New York*

The total number of deaths from cancer fell in the United States for the first time since 1930, when nationwide statistics were first compiled, says a new report by the American Cancer Society. The decline occurred in 2003, when 556 902 people died from cancer; the number who died in 2002 was 557 271.

John Seffrin, chief executive officer of the American Cancer Society, said, "For years we've proudly pointed to dropping cancer death rates, even as a growing and aging population meant more actual deaths.

"Now, for the first time, the advances we've made in prevention, early detection, and treatment are outpacing even the population factors that in some ways obscured that success."

The fall in deaths from cancer was primarily due to a decline in the overall incidence of cancer related to smoking, said the society's programme director for cancer occurrence, Ahmedin Jemal.

"This is mainly because of a substantial reduction in smoking prevalence since the 1964 surgeon general's report on smoking and health," he said. "The percentage of adults who currently smoke cigarettes decreased from 42.4% in 1964 to 20.9% in 2004."


Some experts questioned

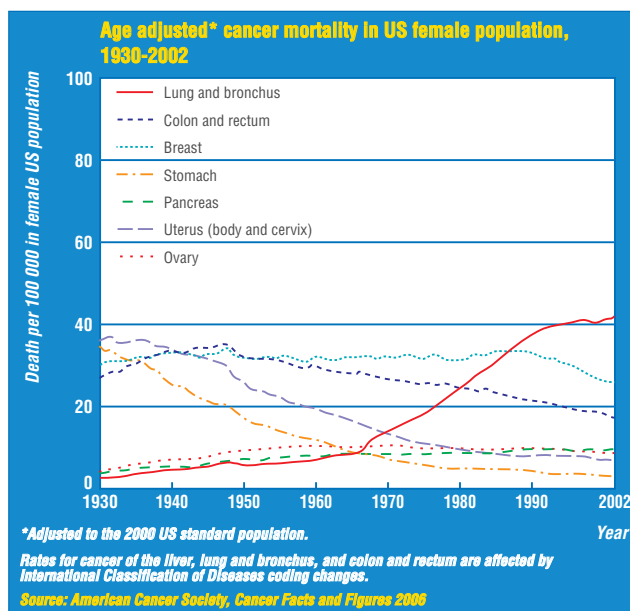
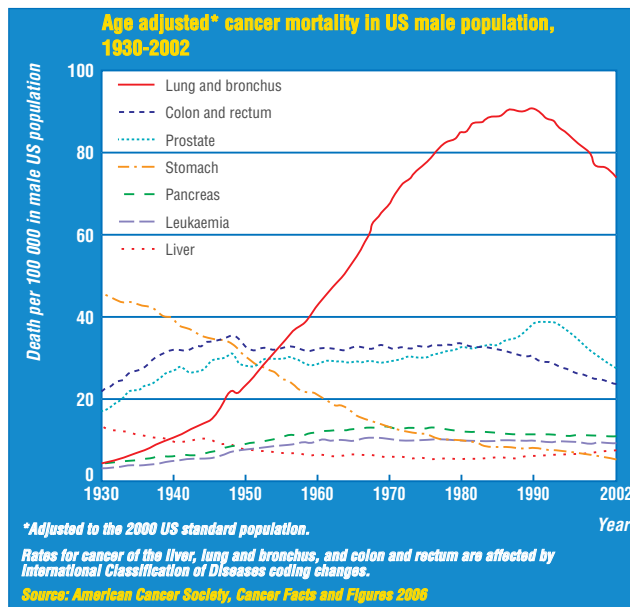
the society's claim that screening and prevention programmes have contributed to the decline in cancer mortality, particularly in prostate and breast cancer.

"The prostate cancer death rate has been declining around the world, including places where prostate cancer screening is not widely used, like the United Kingdom," said Otis Brawley, professor of haematology, oncology, and medicine at the Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, and a former assistant director at the US National Cancer Institute.

The incidence of breast cancer continues to rise, but the report says that breast cancer mortality among women fell by 2.3% a year from 1990 to 2002.

Over this period the number of deaths from cancer among women rose, largely because of the increase in the number of women taking up smoking from the 1960s to the 1990s. Between the mid-1960s and 2002 lung cancer mortality among women increased by more than 400%.

Dr Brawley worries that news of the report is creating overly optimistic expectations regarding cancer treatment and prevention. "Two dots do not make a trend," he said. There were 778 fewer deaths among men, but 409 more deaths among women—and that's out of 556 902 deaths overall," he said. "I'd call that a levelling off and not a decline. There's so much emphasis on screening. But the real bang for the buck is in smoking cessation and prevention of uptake." 



Mental Health Bill for England and Wales may be postponed

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

The government's controversial bill on mental health is expected to be shelved for this parliamentary session, amid widespread opposition from mental health professionals, fears about its effect on ethnic minority groups, and reported second thoughts in the Department for Constitutional Affairs.

The bill was due to be introduced before last Christmas but was held up while a racial impact

assessment was carried out. A Department of Health spokeswoman said the time allotted to that exercise had been extended, although no firm time limit had been set.

Meanwhile the Department for Constitutional Affairs, which assumes responsibility for mental health review tribunals in April, is said to be concerned about the effect of the proposed legislation on the work of the tribunals.

The government first announced proposals to allow the detention of people with dangerous, severe personality disorder who have committed no crime after the furore over the killing of Lyn Russell and her daughter Megan by Michael Stone in Kent in 1996.

The bill, which has seen many changes since the first draft in 2002, was promised in last year's Queen's speech. But the government is now saying only that the bill will be introduced when parliamentary time allows.

Lucy Scott-Moncrieff, a mental health lawyer who represents patients in Broadmoor and other high security hospitals, said: "The

government were going to propose that people who were untreatable could be detained under the new mental health act. They've dropped that now. Somebody can only be detained if they have a condition that warrants treatment and if treatment is available.

"The weird thing is that the government were ... going ahead with this stupid piece of legislation that everyone thinks is unworkable ... but on the practical side they're doing a lot of good stuff. There are pilots that are trying out different forms of treatment so we can have some kind of evidence base to see what actually helps." 