

A European project on incidence, treatment, and outcome of sarcoma.

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BACKGROUND: Sarcomas are rare tumors (1-2% of all cancers) of mesenchymal origin that may develop in soft tissues and viscera. Since the International Classification of Disease (ICD) attributes visceral sarcomas (VS) to the organ of origin, the incidence of sarcoma is grossly underestimated. The rarity of the disease and the variety of histological types (more than 70) or locations account for the difficulty in acquiring sufficient personal experience. In view of the above the European Commission funded the project called Connective Tissues Cancers Network (CONTICANET), to improve the prognosis of sarcoma patients by increasing the level of standardization of diagnostic and therapeutic procedures through a multicentre collaboration.

METHODS/DESIGN: Two protocols of epidemiological researches are here presented. The first investigation aims to build the population-based incidence of sarcoma in a two-year period, using the new 2002 WHO classification and the "second opinion" given by an expert regional pathologist on the initial diagnosis by a local pathologist. A three to five year survival rate will also be determined. Pathology reports and clinical records will be the sources of information. The second study aims to compare the effects on survival or relapse-free period - allowing for histological subtypes, clinical stage, primary site, age and gender - when the disease was treated or not according to the clinical practice guidelines (CPGs).

DISCUSSION: Within CONTICANET, each group was asked to design a particular study on a specific objective, the partners of the network being free to accept or not the proposed protocol. The first protocol was accepted by the other researchers, therefore the incidence of sarcoma will be assessed in three European regions, Rhone-Alpes and Aquitaine (France) and Veneto (Italy), where the geographic distribution of sarcoma will be compared after taking into account age and gender. The conformity of the clinical practice with the recommended guidelines will be investigated in a French (Rhone Alps) and Italian (Veneto) region since the CPGs were similar in both areas.

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