

EXFOLIATIVE CYTOLOGY CELL EXAMINATION: A PILOT EXPERIMENT

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Dr. Robertson recently made the following statement:

It gives me great pleasure indeed to announce that, after months of negotiation, agreement has been reached in regard to a pilot experiment — the first to be conducted in South Africa — which will be organized jointly under the auspices of the Municipality of Brakpan and the National Cancer Association of South Africa. The object is to determine the average demand from South African women for exfoliative cytology smears to be taken in response to a concentrated public education campaign. The exfoliative cytology cell examination for uterine cancer is essentially a cancer-detection test, the material for which is simply, easily, quickly and painlessly taken.

Brakpan was selected for the experiment by virtue of the early interest and representations of the Medical Officer of Health, Dr. H. Bloomberg, in the project of a cancer-screening clinic and because it is regarded as an average South African urban area with a European female population over the age of 21 of approximately 10,000. All services will be rendered free to Brakpan women and no means test will be applied. All costs will be borne jointly by the National Cancer Association and the Municipality of Brakpan.

Uterine cancer, if discovered and treated early, is one of the most curable forms of cancer. At present only about 55% of uterine cancer cases are cured because they are usually already firmly established when detected. If the pilot experiment which we propose to conduct meets with the desired response from the adult female population, it may very well result in reducing cancer of the womb as a cause of death in Brakpan.

At the spearhead of the community-wide educational campaign in Brakpan will be the Association's film 'Time and two women' which is also available in Afrikaans under the title 'Tyd en twee vroue'. Descriptive pamphlets will also be widely distributed. Several screenings will take place at the municipal clinic daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. during the month of November to enable all women to see the film. Dr. H. Bloomberg, Medical Officer of Health, will prepare a tape recording

of his lecture to be played back to audiences before every film show. Exfoliative cytology smears will be taken from those women who desire it, and examined under the supervision of the South African Institute for Medical Research. The examinations will be by appointment only, during the period November 1961-February 1962. Doubtful and presumptive positive slides detected by specially trained cytotechnicians will be referred for specialist diagnosis to pathologists at the South African Institute for Medical Research.

Similar tests carried out in the United States revealed that out of every 1,000 apparently healthy women examined by this technique, at least 5 were found to have cancer *in situ*. The Brakpan experiment will serve to establish the comparable figure for South Africa. In addition, the experiment will provide valuable basic information, a blue-print as it were, to other municipalities who may subsequently wish to tackle the problem of uterine-cancer detection as a matter of routine. The lessons to be learned in Brakpan and the problems encountered should prove to be invaluable for the future.

As stated earlier, the exfoliative cytology cell examination of uterine cancer is essentially a cancer-detection test. It is utilized to trace this form of cancer in its earliest (*in situ*) stages where the disease is already present in apparently healthy women. When discovered in these very early stages the chance of cure by means of radium, X-ray and/or surgery is almost 100%. The test would obviate the problem which faces the medical profession today, namely, that uterine cancer is usually diagnosed only after patients have discovered symptoms connected with the advanced stages of the disease when it is naturally more difficult to cure. Therefore, the pilot experiment should prove invaluable, not only from the scientific and statistical point of view, but will materially increase the chances of complete cure of those women who already have the disease but do not realize it. Their early conditions will almost certainly be cured — a highly desirable state of affairs which may not otherwise be achieved if the disease were left to develop until the symptoms of the advanced form of the disease were to manifest themselves.