What we know about cancer beliefs in American Samoa

Beliefs

Research conducted by the American Samoa Community Cancer Network 2006-08 and by the American Samoa Community Cancer Coalition in 2009 confirmed what others have previously found and uncovered several new beliefs and misconceptions American Samoans hold about cancer.

- Cancer was not amongst the most important health issues.
  - Exercise, diet and diabetes rank highest (1, 2)
- Cancer is believed to be a new disease because many never heard of it when they were younger (1, 3)
- Cancer is not a Samoan illness; there is no word for the disease (1, 3, 4)
- Cancer is associated with hopelessness, worry, and a fear that death is near (1, 4)
- There was widespread knowledge of smoking leading to cancer (1)
- Cancer may be caused by
  - not taking local herbal medicine in time when feeling ill (1)
  - a punishment from God or God’s will (1, 3, 5, 6)
  - spirit possession (1)
  - germs or uncleanness (1)
  - a shift in diet from traditional foods to processed foods containing "chemicals and preservatives" (1, 3)
- The mystery surrounding what causes cancer lead many towards religious comfort (1)
- Older women and men are more likely to believe cancer can be treated or cured by a traditional Samoan healer (2, 4)
- Older women and men are more likely to recommend a cancer patient see a traditional Samoan healer (2, 4)
- Cancer patients are sometimes treated for *mumu* (swelling) or *oloa* (persistent ulcer) by traditional Samoan healers (4)
- People get most cancer information from the hospital, Samoan healers (Taulasea/Fofo), church pastors, and cancer survivors (1)
- Cancer has identifiable symptoms such that you can tell if someone is sick (1, 2, 4)
- Both men and women can have prostate cancer (2)
- You can get prostate cancer from sexual intercourse (2)

"Cancer is a disease people hardly get. We should be afraid of diabetes."

"We should pity those who have cancer because there is no testing and no cure."

"If you have cancer you should not tell another person because they can’t help."

"...if women don’t live healthy it will lead to cancer."

"Because the disease is new we go to the doctor or to the Lord. The Lord is the only cure. The Father in Heaven is the Doctor of all doctors."

"If I were diagnosed I would rely on God."

"[If diagnosed], all we can do is pray." (1)

Sources

(1) Krosch S. Men’s Health Awareness & Prostate Cancer Screening Clinic Program Evaluation. The American Samoa Community Cancer Network. July 2008. NCI Grant #U01CA114590
(2) Krosch S. Men’s Prostate Cancer Screening Clinic Program Impact Evaluation Results. The American Samoa Community Cancer Network. August 2008. NCI Grant #U01CA114590