

# Therapeutic nihilism or therapeutic realism: Perceptions of non-oncologist physicians regarding cancer patients' prognosis

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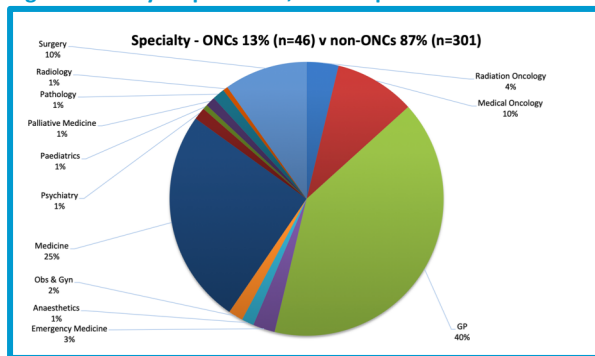
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## Introduction

The initial disclosure of a cancer diagnosis to patients is often made by non-oncology physicians. It is important that realistic expectations of cancer prognosis are communicated in such discussions if this topic is raised.

According to Goldvaser et al.<sup>1</sup>, there is a lack of data on perceptions of cancer patients' prognosis by non-oncology physicians. We conducted a survey among a group of Irish doctors working in medical and radiation oncology ("ONCs" n=46) and doctors working in other areas including GPs and hospital specialties ("nonONCs" n=301).

Figure 1: Study respondents, area of practice



## Methods

Participants were asked to estimate the 5 year survival of 12 common cancers (all stages combined), and also asked to estimate the 5 year survival for 6 clinical scenarios (See table 1). Responses were compared to survival data for the most recent period (2010-2014) published by the National Cancer Registry of Ireland (NCRI)<sup>2</sup>. 95% confidence intervals (CIs) of mean ONC and nonONC survival estimates were compared to the 95% CIs published by the NCRI. Mean survival estimates between the ONC and nonONC groups were compared using the unpaired T-test.

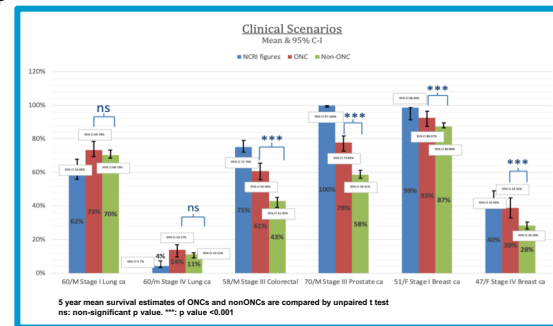
Table 1: Clinical Scenarios

Clinical Scenarios	
1.	A 60-year old man with Stage I Lung Cancer
2.	A 60-year old man with Stage IV Lung Cancer
3.	A 58-year old man with Stage III Colorectal Cancer
4.	A 70-year old man with Stage III Prostate Cancer
5.	A 51-year old lady with Stage I Breast Cancer
6.	A 47-year old lady with Stage IV Breast Cancer

Figure 2: Results (All Stages Combined)



Figure 3: Results (Clinical Scenarios)



## Conclusion

Both groups of doctors had difficulty estimating the survival of common cancers across combined stages, with ONCs estimating correctly in 4 of 12 cancers, and nonONCs in 2 of 12. The clinical scenarios showed that survival estimates are inaccurate even for defined stages among common malignancies such as breast, colorectal and prostate cancer, with greater pessimism among non-oncology doctors. Education of both oncology and non-oncology doctors is required to ensure patients are being counselled appropriately regarding prognosis. We encourage anyone whose role involves discussing prognosis with patients diagnosed with cancer to familiarise themselves with their local cancer registry survival data.

## References

- Goldvaser H, Milman Y, Dujovni T et al. Perception of prognosis of cancer patients by non-oncologists. Int J Clin Pract 2016 Dec;70(12):1027-1032.
- National Cancer Registry of Ireland cancer survival statistics 2010 - 2014. Available at <https://www.ncr.ie/data/survival-statistics>.

## Disclosure statement

No conflicts of interest to declare.

## Acknowledgements

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