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Cancer Gains Called Overstated

WASHINGTON — Gains in treating cancer over the last three decades have been small and overstated by federal health officials, according to a detailed analysis by a congressional oversight agency.

For a majority of the 12 most common tumors, there was little or no improvement from 1950 to 1982 in the rate at which patients survived the disease, the General Accounting Office concluded in a report to Congress.

“Progress has been made,” the report said, but “not as great as that reported” by the National Cancer Institute.

The GAO did not challenge the data on changing survival rates as reported by the cancer institute but questioned their interpretation. It charged that unacknowledged factors, such as the earlier detection of certain cancers and changes in the way data were compiled, “artificially inflate the amount of ‘true’ progress.

“For a majority of the cancers we examined,” the report said, “the actual improvements have been small or have been overestimated by the published rates.”

Dr. Vincent DeVita Jr., director of the National Cancer Institute, called the report “offensive,” saying it ignored what he termed the “enormous progress” made by scientists in understanding the cancer cell and how it becomes malignant.

DeVita also criticized the GAO for focusing on survival statistics as the only measure of progress against cancer and for failing to stress that improved treatments have saved countless lives.

“I think there are literally hundreds of thousands of people alive today who wouldn’t be here if new treatments introduced over the past 15 to 20 years were not available,” he said.

In a written rebuttal included as an appendix of the report, the Department of Health and Human Services charged that the report “must be considered opinion, not fact,” and complained that its tone was “negative” and “counterproductive.”

The study appears to be the first comprehensive effort by a government agency to evaluate the validity of claims by the cancer institute that great progress has been made in curing cancer or extending the lives of its victims. The issue has potential political importance in determining how much money will be allocated to fight cancer compared with other diseases and, within the cancer budget, how much money will be allocated to treatment compared with prevention.

The congressional agency described its findings as “the most comprehensive evidence to date on what actually occurred in the area of cancer patient survival from 1950 to 1982.” Its report appears to endorse the concerns of medical critics who have suggested that the federal government’s progress reports are exaggerated.