

Foreword

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Over the past decade, our understanding of cancer genetics has been transformed, and we have gained remarkable new insights into the causes of cancer. Almost every scientific advance results, at some point, in a public discussion about cancer risks, so it is sobering to realize that we probably know less now about how to communicate cancer risks than we know about cancer genetics. Moreover, decisions by both individuals and health professionals about cancer prevention, detection, and treatment should be an informed balancing of potential results with potential risks. And, as scientists, we have a much clearer picture of individual risks than ever. But here is the paradox: We know far less about how to communicate risks than we know about how to calculate them.

Because of the importance of this topic, and because so little is known about how to communicate cancer risks effectively, I strongly supported the National Cancer Institute's sponsorship of an important conference on "Cancer Risk Communication: What We Know and What We Need to Learn." Publication of the papers presented at that conference as a monograph of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* adds important substance to the knowledge base on cancer risk communication. This monograph has a broad array of contributors, including renowned scholars whose field of study is risk communication and those developing models for use by health professionals. The monograph also includes contributions from representatives of special populations, medical journals that publish risk papers, the mass media, and institutions that conduct risk-related research and then communicate results of that research. As a result, the monograph not only is a major contribution to the literature about cancer risk communication, it provides a unique compilation of expertise.

Just as important, the monograph will help guide future research because it identifies gaps in knowledge that must be

filled. Until that can be done, we must rely on the best practices now known about how to communicate cancer risk. These practices are identified here and can be adopted immediately by those who disseminate cancer risk information.

Questions about how to communicate cancer risk are plentiful, but they are only a fraction of the questions about cancer communications that confront us today. How can we promote the demand for access to and use of cancer information given the high national rates of medical and scientific illiteracy? How can we assure that cancer communications are salient, relevant, and culturally sensitive to diverse audiences? How can we better design our interventions to learn what works, what does not work, and why? How can we help physicians, who have limited time to spend with patients, maximize their communication about cancer? How can we redesign our information systems so they give people the information they want, how they want it, and when and where they want it?

Now, thanks to emerging communications technologies and knowledge developed through academic research, we have an extraordinary opportunity to answer such questions, and we must seize it. Each year, the National Cancer Institute prepares a budget proposal that identifies extraordinary opportunities to further progress brought about by earlier research successes. Our proposal for 2001 will include cancer communications as an extraordinary opportunity for investment. Such an investment can shape the emerging national information infrastructure to improve cancer communications and thereby help improve the public's health. This monograph is an important step in that direction.

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