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Clinical Perspective

Radiation Oncology—Where to from Here? A Global Inquiry into the Perspectives of Radiation Oncology Professionals in Light of the Growing Cancer Epidemic

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Radiation oncology is a vital tool in resisting the cancer epidemic affecting millions worldwide. This study queried the perspectives of radiation oncology professionals and sought their solutions in regard to current practice, future practice, outsourcing, and common values.

Methods: A mass consumer survey was distributed globally that collected quantitative and qualitative data from 245 radiation oncology professionals based in 47 countries.

Results: Participants scored the sector highly on the quality of current practice. The United States was identified as the perceived global leader in the practice of radiation oncology. The sector was considered moderately open to reform with suggestions of better training, greater resources, and incorporation of data informatics. A preference for paradigms involving private enterprise emerged. Appropriate outsourcing tasks and companies were identified and industry leaders evaluated. Remarkable accord was observed in values and priorities across professional groups and examined subsets.

Conclusions: There is an opportunity to realize value through the application of successful global paradigms. Our research generated a unique performance evaluation of the sector by identifying the current situation and areas open to reform. The required shift in the role of government from provider to regulator implied a mandate for a reorientation of policy settings with greater emphasis on free enterprise solutions that maximize value and ultimately advance patient care.

RÉSUMÉ

Introduction : La radio-oncologie est un outil crucial dans la résistance à l'épidémie de cancer qui touche des millions de

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personnes à travers le monde. Dans cette étude, les auteurs ont interrogé des professionnels en radio-oncologie pour connaître leur point de vue et leurs solutions en regard des pratiques actuelles, de la pratique future, de la sous-traitance et des valeurs communes.

Méthodologie : Une enquête en série distribuée à l'échelle mondiale a permis de recueillir des données quantitatives et qualitatives auprès de 245 professionnels en radio-oncologie de 45 pays.

Résultats : Les participants ont donné une note élevée au secteur pour la qualité des pratiques actuelles. Les États-Unis ont été désignés comme le chef de file mondial en matière de pratique de la radio-oncologie. Le secteur est considéré modérément ouvert aux réformes, avec des suggestions visant une meilleure formation, une augmentation des ressources et intégration des données informatisées. Une préférence pour les paradigmes intégrant l'entreprise privée a émergé. Des tâches appropriées et des entreprises spécifiques ont été identifiées pour la sous-traitance et les chefs de file de l'industrie ont été évalués. Un accord remarquable a été observé dans les valeurs et les priorités entre les groupes professionnels et les sous-ensembles examinés.

Conclusions : Il existe une occasion de créer de la valeur par l'application de paradigmes mondiaux fructueux. Nos recherches ont permis de produire une évaluation unique du rendement du secteur en précisant la situation actuelle et les secteurs ouverts à la réforme. Le passage requis du rôle de fournisseur à celui de régulateur pour les gouvernements suppose un mandat de réorientation de l'établissement des politiques, avec un accent accru sur les solutions de libre entreprise qui maximisent la valeur et qui font ultimement progresser les soins aux patients.

Conflicts of interest: Matthew Squires wishes to advise that he is a Director of Precision Cancer Care (ACN 169 873 376). www.precisioncancercare.com.au

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Introduction

Cancer is a growing epidemic affecting millions worldwide. Incidence is expected to reach 22 million cases per year by 2030, up from the current 14 million [1]. Of the eight million people who die annually, many had no recourse to adequate treatment [1]. Radiation therapy stands as a primary source of intervention, with over half of all oncology patients standing to benefit [2]. But access to radiation oncology resources is inadequate in most countries and totally lacking in some [3, 4]. In the third world, 90 percent of people have no recourse to treatment [4]. This translates into a sobering statistic: between one-third and half of global cancer deaths are avoidable [4].

Clearly a change of approach is required if we are to effectively combat these alarming figures. A landmark report by the World Economic Forum recently called for a renewed focus on value, with emphasis on creating long-term sustainability in the sector [5]. Along with most health-related fields, radiation oncology continues to be fueled by government subsidies. Funding models are rarely challenged by beneficiaries who rely on a volume-based approach to sustain their business models. The result is that innovation and efficiency suffer, the victim of blunt bureaucratic formulas [6]. But with the advent of health informatics and the greater ability to measure quality, the expectations of both patients and specialists are changing [7, 8].

Stakeholders are demanding evidence-based value, and the nature of health care investment is evolving. While many individuals are attaining a level of income commensurate with modern cancer care [9], global public health costs are growing at roughly double the rate of growth of gross domestic product [5]. The pressure on health care budgets has limited development and in some countries led to prolonged waiting times and restricted access [9]. Health policies in many countries are now actively seeking to implement various models of value-based care to avoid catastrophic crises [5, 10].

We must endeavor to understand where radiation oncology can optimize its approach and enhance value for the patient and community. Scant primary research has been undertaken seeking solutions from the chief benefactors of the industry: radiation oncologists, medical physicists, and radiation therapists. The input of these professionals is fundamental to allowing radiation oncology to assume its central place in the cancer care agenda.

This study sought to identify systematic issues affecting radiation oncology globally. We sought to quantify the attitudes of radiation oncology professionals in regard to four main research questions: (1) how well is current practice performed; (2) what reforms can be implemented to improve future practice; (3) how feasible is global outsourcing, and what tasks and companies may be involved; and (4) what values motivate the industry.

We obtained a robust and representative sample ($n = 245$) of the global industry that yielded a rich tapestry of data. We discovered a surprising enthusiasm for private sector involvement suggesting an opening exists for innovative

entrepreneurism. We found an openness to reform, an alignment of values, and an appreciation for business solutions offering quality and value. Embracing quality specialist services may be pivotal to successful outsourcing, and a globalization of the industry may hold a significant key to reform.

Method

Ethics approval was granted by the research ethics board of the Australian Institute of Business in May 2017.

A mass consumer survey collected quantitative and qualitative data. Qualitative elements were incorporated through open text fields that encouraged comments, feelings, suggestions, and interpretations. The survey used a concurrent triangulation design that was exploratory and allowed both sets of data to be interpreted together.

Length was limited to 20 questions, which equated to a mean completion time of 8 minutes. Seminal and demographic questions were mandatory while other more complex responses could be skipped - a strategy to encourage the overall completion rate. Questions were grouped according to research themes with each new topic appearing on a separate page. Sixteen of the 20 questions were closed; the remaining 4 sought short responses. Three of these allowed for qualitative feedback and included space to make suggestions and outline an understanding of the sector's purpose. Wording was kept unambiguous and within recommended parameters [11]. Six Likert items were featured that allowed respondents to select a response on a continuous visual scale consisting of five interval points (Table 1). Response intervals were kept equidistant and symmetrical around a neutral response. Four cardinal values were required to be ranked. A supplementary field allowed open comments and an email option allowed participants to receive feedback regarding results.

Data Collection

SurveyMonkey (San Mateo, CA) provided an efficient and economical platform to gather a global sample. A simple random sampling technique was used to ensure data were representative of the population.

Precision Cancer Care provided a platform to stage the survey and facilitated a global advertising campaign. A staggered strategy was used to maximize and prolong industry saturation; when the response rate began to decrease, subsequent iterations of the web link were published. The process continued over a period of 24 days, beginning May 20 and ending June 12, 2017. In total, it is estimated that over 30,000 individuals worldwide were offered an indirect invitation to participate in the study.

Results

Most responses were sourced from web links ($n = 237$) rather than bulk email ($n = 8$). The proportion of complete responses was 40 percent ($n = 98$), with the remainder partial completions ($n = 147$). In total, 245 participants were

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