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New research shows variation in how early cancer is diagnosed in Wales's GP Cluster Networks for the first time

New research¹ by Macmillan Cancer Support and the Welsh Cancer Intelligence and Surveillance Unit of Public Health Wales shows the stage at which cancer is diagnosed differs depending on where people live.

For the first time, this research gives us information by groups of local doctors' practices called GP Cluster Networks showing that between 2011 and 2015, almost one in five people (19 per cent) with cancer in these clusters in Cwm Taf were diagnosed at its most advanced stage - stage 4 - compared to 13 per cent of people in Powys clusters.

Cancer tends to be the most treatable the earlier it is diagnosed.

The research shows that for the whole of Wales almost 17 per cent of new cancer patients registered with a GP were diagnosed with cancer at its earliest stage. The research uses the latest available data for Wales.

Abertawe Bro Morgannwg and Hywel Dda's GP Cluster Networks have a lower percentage of their GP-registered cancer patients diagnosed at the earliest stage. Lung and bowel cancers are some of the largest contributors to these figures.

This new data also show how many new cancer patients registered with GP practices are diagnosed with cancer in local areas with different levels of disadvantage.

The research findings can drive new insights which are important for primary care planning purposes.

For instance, around a quarter of newly diagnosed cancer patients in GP clusters within each of the Aneurin Bevan, Cwm Taf and Cardiff and Vale health boards live in some of the most disadvantaged communities in Wales.

In addition, the data show that 35 per cent of people newly diagnosed with cancer live in a rural area, while the rural population as a whole only accounts for 32 per cent of the total population of Wales.

That over a third of new cancer patients live in rural areas in Wales demonstrates the size of the challenge GP clusters and health boards face in planning cancer care in rural areas, and the difficulty many patients might experience in reaching services.

In some health board's clusters – such as Hywel Dda and Powys - the vast majority of new cancer patients live in rural areas.

The new research is broken down by GP Cluster Network, which were introduced in Wales in April 2014.

Each cluster is made up of groups of GP practices covering approximately 30,000 to 50,000 patients. They aim to improve planning of health services for the population they cover.

Richard Pugh, Head of Services for Macmillan Wales, said: “For the first time, we have in-depth data about the number of people diagnosed with and living with cancer in Wales’s networks of GP practices through Macmillan’s new partnership with the Welsh Cancer Intelligence and Surveillance Unit.

“The new research highlights many areas including that more than a third of people diagnosed with cancer in Wales live in rural areas, which demonstrates just one of the challenges our NHS is facing when caring for people with cancer.

“This new information varies by age, sex, area disadvantage, rurality and the cancer stage at diagnosis, but it does not explain why these variations are happening.

“Although sometimes this variation is small, we want health boards and other organisations who design and deliver cancer care in Wales to look at this new data in depth to shape local services and to drive earlier cancer diagnosis.”

Dyfed Wyn Huws, Director of the Welsh Cancer Intelligence and Surveillance Unit of Public Health Wales, said: “Our new analysis should help GP Cluster Networks and health boards better understand their populations of new cancer patients, as well as provide insights for the prevention and early diagnosis of cancer.

“As well as researching new cancer patients, we also estimated the number of people registered with GPs in Wales who are living with and surviving cancer. This will help plan for longer-term care for cancer patients and their carers.

“We found that for GP cluster cancer patients living in the least disadvantaged areas of Wales, almost 30 per cent had been diagnosed more than 10 and up to 21 years previously, but in the most disadvantaged areas the percentage was only around 28 per cent.”

The new research is available at: <http://www.wcisu.wales.nhs.uk/macmillan-wcisu-partnership>

For information or support call the Macmillan Support Line free on 0808 808 0000 (9am to 8pm Monday to Friday) or visit macmillan.org.uk.

Macmillan can only support people affected by cancer thanks to the public's generosity. To get involved with fundraising for Macmillan, call 0300 100 2000.

ⁱ Cancer Incidence and Prevalence by Cluster Network in Wales, Wales Cancer Intelligence and Surveillance Unit and Macmillan Cancer Support. <http://www.wcisuwales.nhs.uk/macmillan-wcisuwales-partnership>