

Reopening the “CANCER MOONSHOT” in the United States: A great task in the COVID-19 era

Chunsong Hu¹

¹Nanchang University

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Abstract

Cancer is currently a leading cause of mortality in the globe, particularly in the COVID-19 era, due to not enough and not in time care and treatment as well as limited coverage of COVID-19 vaccination. This article briefly discusses the reopening of the “CANCER MOONSHOT” in the United States (US). It’s time for conduction of novel strategies such as the iRT-ABCDEFG and web-based programs for prevention and management of cancer, and further deepen cooperation between China and the US so as to combat cancer and save more lives. In conclusion, as a huge biomedical engineering, the reopening of “CANCER MOONSHOT” is a great task with a special significance and value in the field of cancer prevention and treatment in the COVID-19 era.

REVIEW

Reopening the “CANCER MOONSHOT” in the United States: A great task in the COVID-19 era

Running title: COVID-19 & CANCER MOONSHOT

Chunsong Hu

Nanchang University, Hospital of Nanchang University, Jiangxi Academy of Medical Science, Nanchang 330006, Jiangxi, China

From: Nanchang University, Hospital of Nanchang University, Jiangxi Academy of Medical Science, No. 461 Bayi Ave, Nanchang 330006, Jiangxi, China. Tel: (+86) 189 70816800; Email: cnhucs@ncu.edu.cn or cnhucs@163.com

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Corresponding Author: Chunsong Hu, M.D., Ph.D., Associate Professor of Medicine, Department of Cardiovascular Medicine, Nanchang University, Hospital of Nanchang University, Jiangxi Academy of Medical Science, No. 461 Bayi Ave, Nanchang 330006, Jiangxi, China. Tel: (+86) 189 70816800; Email: cnhucs@ncu.edu.cn or cnhucs@163.com

Abstract

Cancer is currently a leading cause of mortality in the globe, particularly in the COVID-19 era, due to not enough and not in time care and treatment as well as limited coverage of COVID-19 vaccination. This article briefly discusses the reopening of the “CANCER MOONSHOT” in the United States (US). It’s time

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Keywords: cancer, COVID-19, lifestyle, prevention, treatment

A great plan—reopening the “CANCER MOONSHOT” has been announced in the United States (US) by President JOE BIDEN in this February, which was ever launched by the Former President BARACK OBAMA in 2016¹⁻³. It’s really a good and meaningful decision since there is a giant challenge of major non-communicable diseases (mNCDs) in the globe⁴, particularly cancer^{5,6}. As we all known, cancer is a common disease that cause a heavy public health burden and is the leading cause of death. However, there are obvious cancer disparities in the US⁷. In China, there is “Healthy China 2030 Plan”. Thus, we should control and prevent cancer with solid and effective strategies so as to save more lives.

Cancer care and treatment in the Covid-19 era

Currently, the Covid-19 pandemic is still continuing in the globe due to the Delta and Omicron variants of SARS-CoV-2. So far (May 6, 2022), there were more than 513.955 million confirmed cases and over 6.24 million deaths in countries worldwide according to the reports of the World Health Organization. Since cancer cases are an independent and high risk for SARS-CoV-2 infection and adverse outcomes of Covid-19, particularly with several risk factors, such as advancing age, smoking history, and concurrent comorbidities, better cancer management is needed and palliative care should be the prioritization during the pandemic^{8,9}, and it’s also a chance to remodel cancer care in the globe¹⁰.

On the one hand, the Covid-19 pandemic leads to an increased risk of fatal outcomes and higher mortality, and lowering quality of treatment, care, and life in patients with cancer¹¹, and assessment of the quality of the samples and associated data in Biobanks is also a novel challenge for cancer research¹². On the other hand, treatment of Covid-19 in cancer cases is a big challenge because we need not only to protect cardiovascular system by vaccination and bio-agents during antiviral and anti-thrombus treatments, but also enhance survival rates of cancer and improve cancer outcomes. However, it remains uncertain regarding Covid-19 vaccine efficacy in cancer patients even if there are positive humoral and cellular immune responses¹³. Moreover, there are the risks of vaccine-related adverse events. Herein, the reopening of “CANCER MOONSHOT” during the pandemic and post-Covid-19 era is a fantastic decision with a special significance and value. It will help us to realize the transformation from cancer oppression to conquer cancer (Figure 1).

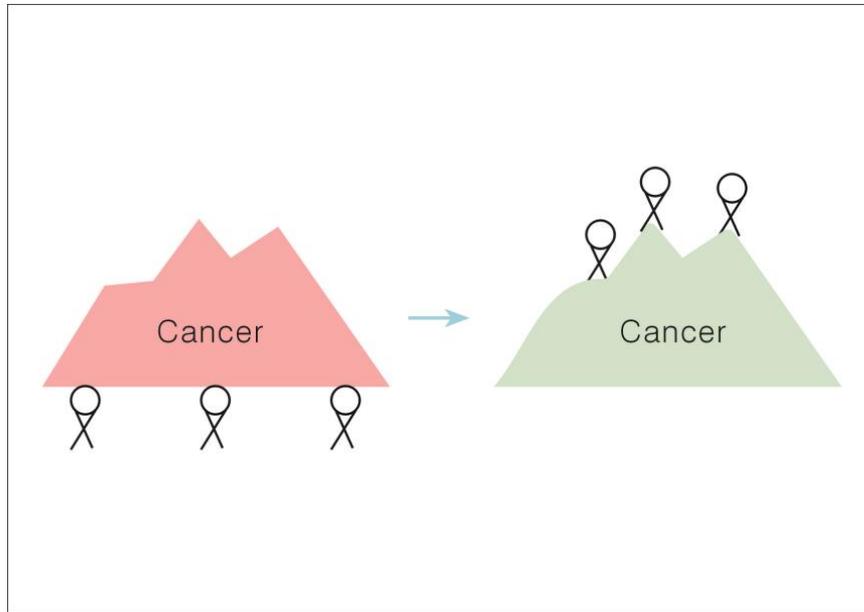


Fig. 1 | The reopening of “CANCER MOONSHOT”: From cancer oppression to conquer cancer . It’s believed that with the help of iRT-ABCDEFG program which includes the Goal of combating cancer in the globe, people will get the final victory by development of fresh preventive strategies, new diagnostic tools, and novel therapies of precise medicine.

During the pandemic or post-Covid-19 era, patients with active cancer and in cancer survivors have a worse outcome due to persistent multi-organ viral attacks or an abnormal immune response¹⁴. There are both more adverse cardiac outcomes and significantly increased cardiac biomarkers as well as a high in-hospital mortality in Covid-19 patients with cancer¹⁵ due to mainly driven by gender, advancing age, smoking, socioeconomic deprivation, and other comorbidities^{16,17}, such as cardiovascular disease (CVD), diabetes. And these risk factors are more strongly associated with infection death. Covid-19 cases with both cancer and established CVD and risk factors are at the highest risk for serious complications, including death, thus, these patients need to be screened by both cardiac biomarkers and a more focused cardiovascular imaging approach so as to minimize the risk of SARS-CoV-2 infection¹⁸. In fact, Covid-19 is a vital risk factor for acute myocardial infarction and ischaemic stroke in the era of Covid-19¹⁹.

Normalized understanding, lung cancer is still the leading cause of cancer death in the US (approximately 350 deaths per day)⁶, however, breast cancer surpassed lung cancer as the leading cause of cancer death among Black women in 2019²⁰, and the number of cancer survivors continues to increase mainly due to improvement and advances in early screening, detection, and targeted treatment^{6,21}. During the pandemic and post-Covid-19 era, there are rising needs for the rapid expansion of telemedicine platforms¹⁴ for cancer cases. In a word, patients with cancer need the best possible care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A study showed that endotheliopathy presented in Covid-19 is associated with critical illness and death²². Single-cell atlases revealed the biological effect of severe SARS-CoV-2 infection and new cellular targets for treatments²³. Genome-wide CRISPR Screens also show potential therapeutic targets and small-molecule antagonists may inhibit SARS-CoV-2 infection²⁴. These studies on the mechanisms and novel treatments will help to combat Covid-19 for improvement of cancer outcomes. And these new strategies will help to further improve quality of life (QOL) and outcomes in cancer patients with Covid-19 in the globe.

Vaccination of COVID-19 for protection of cancer cases

Since Covid-19 can be particularly lethal in patients with cancer²⁵ and vaccination may maximize the health

benefits²⁶, it' should be recommended to protect cancer patients. Clinical trials have demonstrated the safety and efficacy of specific chemicals, such as Remdesivir²⁷, and Tocilizumab, an IL-6 receptor (IL-6R) antagonist²⁸, multiple vaccines, such as Ad26.COV2.S^{29,30}, the mRNA-1273^{31,32}, and neutralizing antibodies, such as REGEN-COV³³, Sotrovimab³⁴, and Bamlanivimab³⁵ for the prevention and treatment of Covid-19. Definitely, these protective strategies should be prioritized for cancer patients during the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, there are increased risks of adverse outcomes or events (myocarditis, pericarditis, and cardiac arrhythmias) following vaccination of messenger RNA-based (mRNA) vaccines (BNT162b2 and mRNA-1273) in the general population, particularly those younger than 40³⁶. Moreover, there is also cytokine release syndrome (CRS), a vaccine-related adverse event, evidenced by raised inflammatory markers, thrombocytopenia, elevated cytokine levels (IFN- γ /IL-2R/IL-18/IL-16/IL-10) and steroid responsiveness³⁷. But there is also a study which found that a third dose of BNT162b2 (mRNA vaccine of COVID-19) is safe, improves humoral immunity against SARS-CoV-2 and could be immunologically beneficial for patients with cancer (solid tumors) on active chemotherapy³⁸.

Although patients with Covid-19 have high risk of adverse outcomes during active cancer care and treatment^{39,40}, e.g., deep vein thrombosis, pulmonary embolism, and bleeding⁴¹, cancer patients have lower rates of SARS-CoV-2 infection after Covid-19 vaccination, especially with additional vaccination doses (e.g., mRNA-1273)^{42,43}. On the one hand, treatment of solid cancer needs to follow standardized guidelines⁴⁴, and the use of a third vaccine dose can improve outcomes⁴⁵. On the other hand, those advanced age, male, with a hematologic malignant tumor, had low antibody titers after vaccination⁴⁶, moreover, 50% of patients with hematologic cancers and solid cancers, have lost nAbs against major variants at 6 months after vaccination⁴⁷. After the third dose of vaccination, patients with cancer have improved antibody levels⁴⁸, even a 20-fold increase in titers from a third dose⁴⁶. Currently, mortality in cancer patients confirmed with Covid-19 has also improved in Europe⁴⁹ due to earlier diagnosis and improved management. In general, the mRNA-1273 COVID-19 vaccine is safe and beneficial for patients with cancer^{50,51}, particular in preventing serious illness and death due to the potential for immune activation⁵².

Novel strategies for management of cancer in the COVID-19 era

Novel strategies are needed to change current side-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on biomedical and cancer research practices as well as health care^{53,54}, for example, a mounting mental health crisis⁵⁵. And scientists and clinicians should know about the importance of public engagement with science⁵⁶. Currently, a detailed plan should be prepared for cancer care and treatment during Covid-19⁵⁷. For example, as simple public measures, wearing cloth masks and keeping social isolation are needed for against the risk for a potential Covid-19 exposure and prevention of Covid-19^{58,59}. However, there were more common of cancelled medical care and cancer screening during Covid-19⁶⁰. Thus, we should have appropriate allocation of limited health care resources.²⁵ Current short-term follow-up showed that a considerable prevalence of neurocognitive impairment, psychiatric morbidity and poor QOL in Covid-19 survivors⁶¹, but there are no data on whether these patients will suffer from cancer in the future.

Proudly, a general formula for management of mNCDs or a healthy and longevity equivalence and a standardized comprehensive iRT-ABCDEF program for cancer had already been setup^{62,63}. Since major risk factors related to unhealthy lifestyle highly link to cancer and other mNCDs (CVD, diabetes, chronic respiratory or renal disease, neurodegenerative or mental disease), healthy "environment-sleep-emotion-exercise-diet" intervention [E(e)SEEDi] lifestyle is very helpful to human health. As a novel and magic "polypills"⁶⁴, it's worthy of conduction for universal health coverage. For example, as a healthy lifestyle, the olive oil consumption is beneficial to human health, and particularly for the prevention of mNCDs (CVD, diabetes, and cancer) and inflammation including SARS-CoV-2 infection⁶⁵, and higher olive oil intake was associated with lower risk of total and cause-specific mortality⁶⁶. Newly, the scientists in the US developed a noninvasive treatment platform for diverse cancer types⁶⁷, it's helpful to many patients.

There are similarities in risk for both COVID-19 and cancer disparities due to socioeconomic disadvantages, level of education, lifestyle factors, health comorbidities, and limited access to medical care⁶⁸. And there are

low anxiety and deteriorating mental health among patients with cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic⁶⁹. On the one hand, delays in surgery may result in extensive psychosocial distress⁷⁰. On the other hand, the proportion over-due for cancer screening is increasing⁷¹. Thus, innovative early detection and diagnosis, and timely and appropriate therapy for cancer are vital measures for the secondary prevention of cancer in the COVID-19 pandemic⁷².

It's also important steps by the prioritization of oncological surgical care and the allocation of resources during the COVID-19 pandemic⁷³. In addition, lifestyle modification (dietary supplementation and regular physical exercise) is effective in treatment outcomes, quality of life, and overall survival in cancer patients with COVID-19⁷⁴. Moreover, clinical decision support systems⁷⁵ and web-based lifestyle interventions^{76,77} for cancer survivors are a promising treatment option due to being both affordable and accessible. Despite challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the home-based vegetable gardening program is feasible, well-received, and may result in increased V and F consumption among cancer survivors⁷⁸.

Cooperation between China and the US for combating cancer

At present, Chinese people are working hard to build a healthy, prosperous, beautiful, harmonious “HAPPINESS CHINA”. I think that “common health is common prosperity” in the new era. In fact, “common prosperity” includes the organic unity of “material wealth, spiritual wealth, and physical and mental health”. It can be said that “common health” is a higher level of “common prosperity”. This is not only the common ideal and pursuit of Chinese people, but also the people of the world, including the US. The new vision of “A Community with A Shared Future for Mankind” proposed by Chinese President XI JINPING in Switzerland 5 years ago⁷⁹ has been widely recognized by the international community. This requires us to first strive to improve and protect the ecosystem, control and reduce environmental pollution.

Sincerely speaking, China is currently committed to carbon neutralization and carbon peaking for better protection of the ecosystem. And China and the US reached friendly cooperation in the field of the global climate change, which is also an important opportunity. Both sides should take this as the fulcrum to expand and deepen relevant cooperation. Whatever, I think these strategies are also very helpful to new “CANCER MOONSHOT” in the US. I sincerely expect the cooperation between China and the US is beneficial to the world's economic and social development.

All in all, the Covid-19 pandemic is still continuing in the globe due to the Delta and Omicron variants of SARS-CoV-2. Since there were higher viral loads in patients infected with the SARS-CoV-2 variants⁸⁰, and early non-neutralizing, afucosylated antibody responses are associated with Covid-19 severity⁸¹, whether these patients are easy to suffer from cancer after recovery or not, and whether cancer patients with Covid-19 are easy to have adverse outcomes or recover, it needs longer-term follow-up or more data. And I think that the reopening of “CANCER MOONSHOT” in the US is really a great task with a special significance and value in both the pandemic and post-Covid-19 era. At the same time, since the distance between cancer and health is only “1M”⁸², and there are cardiovascular, diabetes, and cancer strips⁸³, both “*Health in All Policies*” and “*Health in All Laws*”^{63,84,85} are helpful to cancer prevention and treatment in the globe.

Conclusions and outlook

Cancer is currently a leading cause of mortality in the globe, particularly in the COVID-19 era, due to not enough and not in time care and treatment as well as limited coverage of COVID-19 vaccination. It's time for conduction of a novel program for prevention and management of cancer and further deepen cooperation between China and the US so as to combat cancer. In conclusion, the reopening of “CANCER MOONSHOT” is a great task with a special significance and value in the field of cancer prevention and treatment in the COVID-19 era.

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Author contributions

C.H. is an Associate Professor of Medicine, Hospital of Nanchang University, Jiangxi Academy of Medical Science, Nanchang University, Jiangxi, China. He had full access to all of the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

Additional information

Correspondence should be addressed to Chunsong Hu

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