Report: Definition Of Cancer Should Be Tightened

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A group of experts advising the nation's premier cancer research institution has recommended sweeping changes in the approach to cancer detection and treatment, including changes in the very definition of cancer and eliminating the word entirely from some common diagnoses.

The recommendations, from a working group of the National Cancer Institute [1], were published on Monday in the Journal of the American Medical Association. They say, for instance, that some premalignant conditions, like one that affects the breast called ductal carcinoma in situ [2], which many doctors agree is not cancer, should be renamed to exclude the word carcinoma so that patients are less frightened and less likely to seek what may be unneeded and potentially harmful treatments that can include the surgical removal of the breast.

The group, which includes some of the top scientists in cancer research, also suggested that many lesions detected during breast, prostate, thyroid, lung and other cancer screenings should not be called cancer at all but should instead be reclassified as IDLE conditions, which stands for "indolent lesions of epithelial origin."

While it is clear that some or all of the changes may not happen for years, if it all, and that some cancer experts will profoundly disagree with the group's views, the report from such a prominent group of scientists who have the clear backing of the National Cancer Institute brings the discussion to a much higher level and will most likely change the national conversation about cancer, its definition, its treatment and future research.

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