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Appeal for funds to fight curse of brain tumours

By Steve Connor, Science Editor

Where is the money to help young cancer victims, campaigners ask

Brain tumours have become the biggest cause of death among young cancer patients, but the disease receives only a small fraction of the funding spent on researching other forms of cancer.

Some 16,000 people in Britain are diagnosed with a brain tumour each year and more men under the age of 45 and more women under the age of 35 will die of the disease than from any other cancer, according to a report out today.

In children, brain tumours have overtaken leukaemia in terms of the number of deaths caused by cancer each year, yet leukaemia research receives almost 10 times as much funding as studies into brain cancer, according to the charity Brain Tumour Research.

The increase in survival rates of many other cancers, such as breast and prostate cancers, has not been matched by a corresponding rise in the rates of survival for someone suffering from a brain tumour, the charity says.

The typical survival rates of many cancers over a five-year period are from about 50 per cent to as high as 90 per cent. But the corresponding survival rates for brain tumour patients are about 14 per cent for both men and women. The number of children dying from brain tumours has risen by one-third between 2001 and 2007.

"Research into brain tumours is in its infancy, with very little known about the behaviour of brain tumours, their effective diagnosis and treatment, let alone finding a cure," the report says. "Funding for this research lags behind other cancers and clinical understanding of these cancers does not readily translate to brain tumours."

Brain tumours are the Cinderella cancer in terms of raising funds, with few charitable donations. Government funding for research is "particularly low", and the lack of money being spent on the disease is likely to lead to more health inequality for brain tumour patients in terms of awareness, diagnosis, treatment and survival, it says.

There is evidence that the incidence of disease may be increasing, especially in younger people. In 2007, 89 children died of brain tumours, compared to 61 who died of leukaemia, while in 2001 there were 67 child deaths from brain cancer and 100 deaths from leukaemia.

Kevin O'Neill, a consultant neurosurgeon at Imperial College London, said: "Brain tumours are on the increase, reportedly in the region of 2 per cent per year, but in my unit alone we have seen the number of brain tumour cases nearly double in the last year. Brain tumours... can't be prevented or screened for as we don't know the cause. It is frustrating that treatment options are so limited. More research is desperately needed, but we are struggling to get funds."

Wendy Fulcher, chair of the Brain Research Trust, said that the opening of a new research laboratory at Charing Cross Hospital in London dedicated to brain cancer is an important first step but is just a drop in

the ocean: "The Government and major cancer research donors must increase the proportion it spends on research or the shocking statistics will only get worse."

The charity found that the actual amount of money spent by the Government on brain tumour research was only half of the official figure for 2007-08 given by the Medical Research Council. Brain tumour research received less than 1 per cent of the total amount of money spent on cancer research in Britain.

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