

## PRESS RELEASE

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### CANCER IN THE MOVIES

It's time cinema directors realised cancer isn't always a death sentence,  
a new study shows

*Lugano, Switzerland / Vienna, Austria, 20 September 2012* – Films that feature characters with cancer have become a familiar sight for movie-goers in recent years, but they rarely portray the patient's chances of survival accurately, Italian researchers will report at the ESMO 2012 Congress of the European Society for Medical Oncology in Vienna, Austria.

After carefully studying 82 movies that center on a person with cancer, from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Gran Torino* to *Diary of a Country Priest* and beyond, Dr Luciano De Fiore from Sapienza University of Rome and colleagues found the cancer experiences described in the films were quite different from the truth.

In recent years, movies have tackled some of the most important issues around cancer, he says, such as epidemiology and environmental causes of cancer in *Erin Brockovich*, *Michael Clayton* or *The last 56 Hours*; the economic implications of therapies in *The Rainmaker*, the management of symptoms in *Wit* and *Dying Young*, and care toward the ending of life in *Les Invasions Barbares*, *Eternity and a Day* and *The First Beautiful Thing*.

"Nowadays cinema is confronting the most important issues for oncological disease, which were mostly absent in the earlier days of cinema," says Dr. De Fiore. "Cancer is no easy matter to portray, and seeing it in a movie gives the audience a chance to give voice to their emotions. This is useful for the sharing of cancer care, from personal or familiar problems to issues of collective relevance."

But things for cancer patients are not always as bleak as movie plots make out, the researchers note. "Very often the ill person doesn't get over the disease and his death is somehow useful to the plot's outcome. This pattern is so strongly standardized that it persists in spite of real progress of treatments."

“Maybe there’s an ‘educational’ gap in the concept of movies on cancer,” Dr De Fiore says. “Patients’ survival is very rarely due to treatments in the cinema. Fortunately in real life, this has become mostly untrue.”

In the movies the researchers studied, 40 characters with cancer were women, and 35 men. In 21 films the type of cancer was not mentioned. Symptoms were considered in 72% of the movies, while diagnostic tests were mentioned in 65%. The most frequent treatment mentioned in the movies was chemotherapy followed by pain-relief. Death occurred 46 times (63% of all movies). Doctors and nurses turned up in 58 films (77%).

Interestingly, Hollywood didn’t seem so focused on the big killers among cancer, except for lung tumors, the research showed. “Although breast cancer has a very high impact on female subjects, it is barely represented. Instead relatively rare leukemia, lymphomas and brain tumors predominate.”

Despite these flaws, movies about cancer could have a positive impact, for patients and for doctors, say the researchers. “Using the ‘big screen’ to show stories about cancer could help raise awareness about how large the problem is and what new therapies are available,” says Dr De Fiore. “Also, by watching movies on cancer, oncologists could become more conscious of problems they are already facing in the therapeutic setting: cancer and sexuality, the relationship between the patient and the medical staff, side-effects of therapies. And some films simply make us reflect upon the meaning of life and death.”

"Theater and movies must always look on 'dramatic' things - this has been true since the days of tuberculosis which was at that time a death sentence and around which a lot of plots evolved, ranging up to such dramatic deaths as in *La Boheme* or *La Traviata*," commented Prof Christoph Zielinski, President, Central European Cooperative Oncology Group.

“When considering cancer, the more 'dramatic' forms are being portrayed, as fate of both patients and their surroundings can evolve around them. In reality, it is much more living with cancer, being diagnosed with it, being treated and, finally, surviving it which dominates human lives,” Prof Zielinski said.

“The prognoses of the vast majority of these tumours has become much better or at least better over the years. However, the good news is difficult to portray or even to show in drama, which is very nicely shown by this interesting piece of research.”

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## Notes to Editors

### Disclaimer

Information contained in this press release was provided by the abstract's author and reflects the content of the study. It does not necessarily express ESMO's point of view.

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The European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO) is the leading European professional organization committed to advancing the specialty of medical oncology and promoting a multidisciplinary approach to cancer treatment and care. ESMO's mission is to advance cancer care and cure through fostering and disseminating good science that leads to better medicine and determines best practice.

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**Abstract:** 1408

**ONCOMOVIES: CANCER IN CINEMA**

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**Aim:** To describe how movies portray cancer, and the experience of illness, through an analysis of movies throughout more than 70 years of cinema.

**Materials and methods:** Cross-sectional descriptive study. In order to retrieve the relevant literature, we searched the Medline database using different keywords. A sample of convenience of films was analysed in which cancer had "prompt", "relevant", or "plot" character. Movies yearbook and databases (AllMovie, IMDb, Movieplayer, MyMovies) were consulted. Each film was viewed by two observers who recorded patients variables (age, gender, marital status, etc), the cancer process (type, symptoms, therapy, and evolution), and the health care environment, among others.

**Results:** 376 papers have been retrieved, but only a small percentage has been considered as relevant to the study. 75 films produced by 13 countries (years 1939-2012) were analyzed. 40 patients were women, 35 men, and 64% belonged to the upper and upper/middle social class. The most common cancers were lymphoma, CNS tumours, and leukaemia. In 21 films the type of cancer was not mentioned. Symptoms were considered in 72% of the movies, while diagnostic tests were mentioned in 65%. The most frequent treatment mentioned in the movies was chemotherapy followed by antalgic therapy. Death occurred 46 times (63% of all movies). Doctors and nurses turned up in 58 films (77%).

**Conclusions:** there is a trend of cancer narrative in movies, especially in the last few years. Cancer experiences described in the films are quite different from the truth: movies prefer younger patients, higher social class; the prevalence of cancer site does not match the epidemiological data (e.g. breast cancer only in 5 movies). However, symptoms, diagnostic tests, and treatments tend to be based on real life, particularly in the production of the last twenty years. Usually, cancer patients die at the end of the movie. Some of the films evaluated may be a first hand resource for training health professionals, while some others could be a valued example of malpractice.

**Disclosure:** All authors have declared no conflicts of interest.

**Keyword:** cancer, tumour, movies, film, treatment