

Trends in educational inequalities in site-specific cancer mortality among Belgian men: 1990s-2000s

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Background

According to the 'fundamental cause theory', emerging knowledge on health-enhancing behaviours and technologies results in persisting and even widening health disparities, since higher educated people benefit more from this knowledge. As for cancer, prevention and treatment have improved substantially in recent decades, likely resulting in widening disparities. This study aims to assess socioeconomic inequalities in site-specific cancer mortality in Belgian men, and to examine to what extent these inequalities have changed over time.

Methods

Data were derived from record linkage between the Belgian census of 1991 and 2001 and register data on mortality and emigration for 01/03/1991-31/12/1997 and 01/10/2001-31/12/2011. The study population comprised all Belgian men aged 50–79 years at the time of the censuses. Both absolute (age-standardized mortality rates (ASMR)) and relative inequality measures (mortality rate ratios and relative indices of inequality (RII)) have been calculated.

Results

For almost all cancer sites mortality rates dropped significantly between the 1990s and the 2000s. All educational groups showed a decline in cancer mortality, except for pancreas cancer where the ASMR only dropped for high-educated men. Contrariwise, relative educational differences are increasing. In the 2000s, low-educated men are 2.2 times more likely [RII = 2.2 (95%CI 2.1-2.2)] to die from cancer than those with tertiary education compared to 1.8 (1.7-1.9) in the 1990s. Educational inequalities are most pronounced for lung, head and neck, stomach and bladder cancer, resulting in RIIs up to 4.0 for lung cancer. Furthermore inequalities are most widening for lung, head and neck, and pancreas cancer.

Conclusions

Despite decreasing cancer mortality, relative educational inequalities are increasing. Disparities are most pronounced for preventable cancers as suggested by the fundamental cause theory. Policy efforts remain crucial in order to tackle these increasing inequalities.

Key messages

- Despite an overall decreasing trend in Belgian male cancer mortality, relative educational inequalities are widening
- These inequalities and their widening are most pronounced for preventable cancers