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Bowel cancer is rising among young people

Should the screening age come down?

Sep 28th 2023

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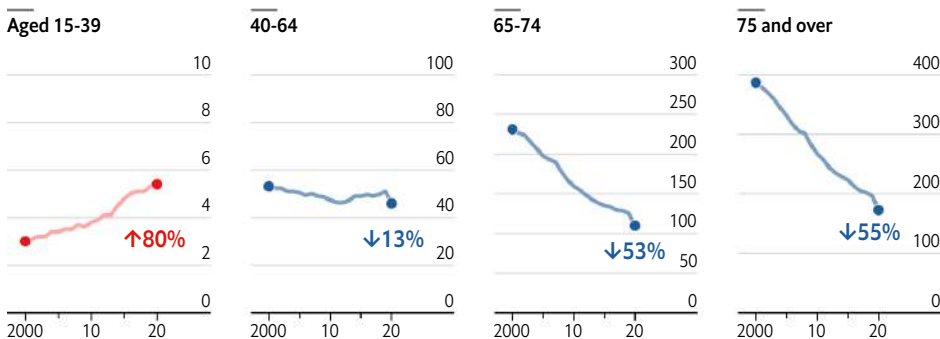
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WHEN DAME DEBORAH JAMES, a British teacher-turned-journalist, was diagnosed with bowel cancer she was just 35 years old. She died less than six years later in 2022, after documenting her life with the disease and raising more than £11m (\$13.7m) for bowel-cancer research and awareness. Her death at that young age shocked many. But data suggest that cases like hers are becoming more common (see chart 1).

Against the grain

United States, colorectal cancer rates per 100,000 population

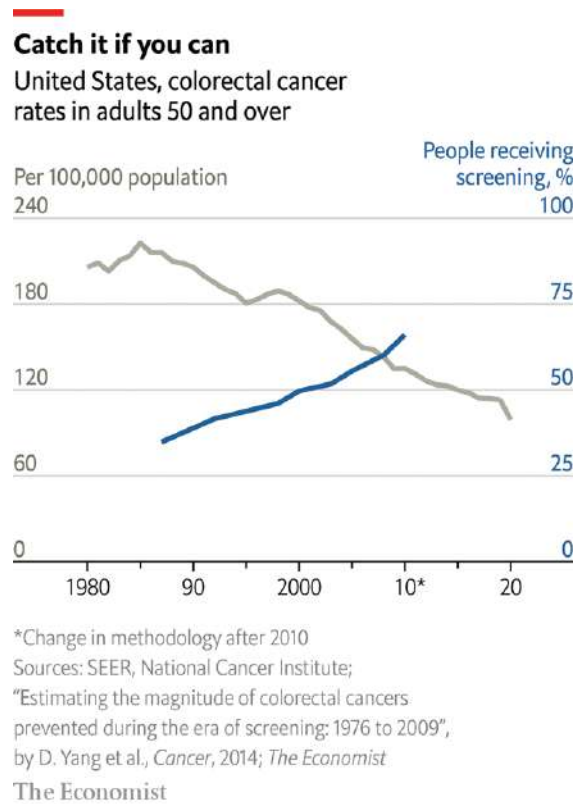


Sources: SEER, National Cancer Institute; *The Economist*

Bowel cancer, also known as colorectal cancer, is the second-most lethal cancer worldwide after lung cancer. But cases in many high-income countries have steadily fallen across older age groups over the past two decades. In America, rates among people aged over 75 have more than halved, from 386 to 173 per 100,000 people; the pattern is similar for people between the ages of 65 and 74. But there is a peculiar trend emerging among younger people. Rates for those aged between 15 and 39 almost doubled between 2000 and 2020, from three to 5.4 per 100,000. Because young people are not screened, the real number of under-50s with bowel cancer is probably much higher than the data suggest. In 2020 the pandemic also led to fewer people than normal being diagnosed, meaning the increase could be even greater.

The reason for this trend among the young is unclear, though it fits with a general increase in worldwide cancer cases in people aged under 50. Bowel cancer has previously been associated with problems such as an unhealthy lifestyle and poor diet. Studies also indicate that bowel cancer is linked to specific bacterial communities in the gut. One meta-analysis suggested that young people with bowel cancer have particular microbiome profiles. Because tumours can take decades to grow, these factors could stretch back into childhood.

Cases can also be easily missed in younger populations because the symptoms overlap with common health issues like irritable bowel syndrome. Not many doctors nor patients consider cancer when a 30-year-old has changing bowel habits and abdominal cramps. This means that the cancer often spreads before it is caught.



Older people are much more likely to be diagnosed with bowel cancer because screening has increased among the over-50s. This has made a significant impact by catching bowel polyps before they become cancerous. In America, rates have consistently dropped since the mid-1980s (see chart 2). Similar patterns can be seen in other countries.

As a result, the universal screening age is being lowered. In America it was brought down from 50 to 45 in 2021; in Britain, it will be lowered from 60 to 50 by 2025. The US Preventive Services Task Force, an independent, publicly funded panel that sets national health-care guidelines, found that beginning screening at 45 would prevent 24 to 28 deaths from bowel cancer per 1,000 screened adults (across all included age groups), compared with not screening at all.

Some doctors worry that even 45 is too old. The initial test usually involves a stool sample sent to

laboratories that look for signs of blood. The next stage is a colonoscopy. Widening this out to the general population takes time and money. But a lack of understanding over why rates among young people are increasing makes it hard to establish who exactly should be tested. ■

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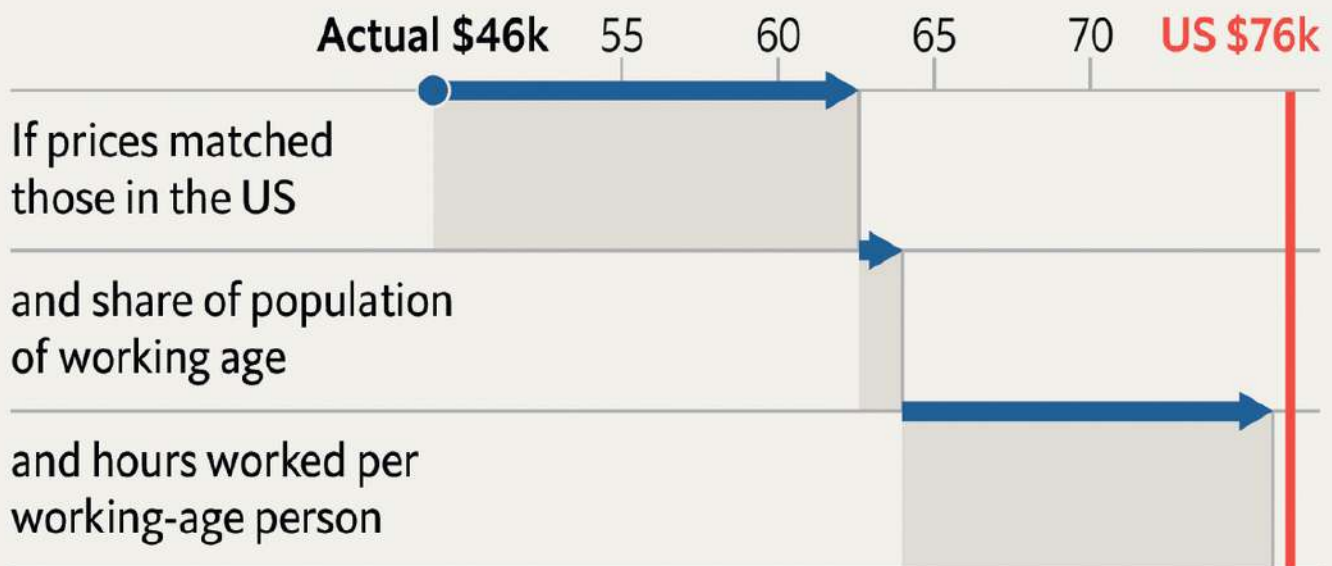
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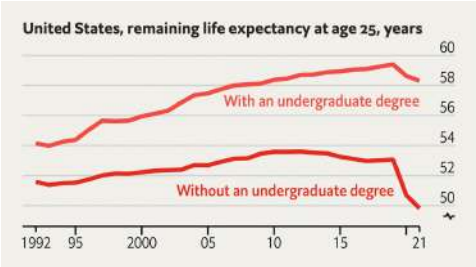


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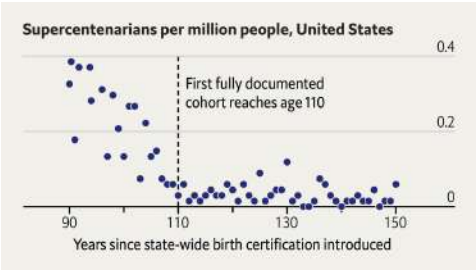
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