In industrial nations, cancer is the second-most common cause of death. Primarily due to the demographic change, the number of patients newly diagnosed with cancer will further increase. According to data from the Robert-Koch-Institute, more than 477,000 people develop cancer in Germany each year. About half of these patients die. In the last years the incidences of cancer in men increased by 21 percent, 14 in women. Cancer is currently responsible for every fifth death in Germany.

Cancer Treatment is Becoming Increasingly Individualized

Cancer is a genetic disease. Over the last two decades research has provided insights into the underlying genetic alterations. Moreover, we understand much better now how tumor cells can escape the immune system and learn to become metastatic. Yet, for many tumors successful treatment remains a challenge: Every patient has a tumor with specific molecular characteristics, different from the tumor of another patient, making one treatment for all impossible. This has changed how some tumors are being treated: Drugs and antibodies were developed that can precisely attack tumors; tumor tissue is analysed biologically and molecularly so that the treatment with the greatest chance of success can be recommended for the individual patient. At the same time surgical oncology and radiation improved in preciseness: more than ever before, surgeons know how much tumor tissue to remove in order to preserve the integrity of an organ’s functions; radiotherapy is planned in a way that spares surrounding healthy tissues to the greatest extent possible. Yet, there are many tumors where targeted therapies still need to be developed.

Prevention and Early Detection Help Avert Cancer

Extensive and expensive treatments are necessary once cancer has taken hold. They require a collaboration between several medical disciplines. Better than having to treat the disease, however, would be to stop it from developing in the first place. In fact, some tumors can already be prevented. Estimates indicate that every second or third tumor could be avoided through better and systematic exploitation of prevention and early detection.

Cancer: a Major Challenge

With the German Cancer Consortium we are ready to take up the challenge. It is an exciting time for cancer research: increasingly, discoveries are being successfully translated from the laboratory into the clinic. This requires the type of close collaboration between scientists and physicians that is already being successfully implemented at the National Center for Tumor Diseases (NCT) in Heidelberg. Through the German Cancer Consortium (DKTK), we are expanding this exceptional collaboration between research and clinical applications nationwide. The idea of the consortium was brought about through an initiative of the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, the participating German federal states, the German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ) in Heidelberg and the German Cancer Aid. In October 2012, the DKTK was finally constituted. For all partners, and the DKFZ in particular, this offers the unique opportunity to cooperate on a long-term basis with some of the strongest German partners in university cancer medicine. We are convinced that this will bring about permanent improvement in the treatment of cancer patients.

Professor Dr Dr h.c. OTMAR D. WIESTLER
Chairman of the German Cancer Research Center as well as Spokesman of the German Cancer Consortium
Successful cancer research requires extensive exchange between many disciplines. High-quality cancer research in the USA, for example, often takes place at big centers with more than 10,000 employees. The DKTK aims to build such a network over the long term by linking the German Cancer Research Center in Heidelberg with some of the strongest university hospitals in Germany. Currently 20 institutes at eight partner sites are collaborating in the DKTK.