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LETTERS

Hazards of waiting to treat cancer

Editor, The Record:

I take issue with the article, "Prostate cancer: difficult choices" (June 5), summarizing the Journal of the American Medical Association report, which concluded that surgery or radiation provides minimal, if any, benefits compared with watchful waiting.

Not all prostate cancer is the same. Cancer of the prostate can behave in an indolent fashion (very slow-growing), in which case a man will die WITH prostate cancer but not OF the cancer. But prostate cancer can also be aggressive, resulting in rapid progression and

death: 35,000 deaths per year in American men.

For the most indolent of cancers, intervention will rarely alter the excellent prognosis. For the most aggressive of cancers, intervention will rarely alter the poor prognosis. However, in the gray zone between these two extremes exists a substantial population for whom intervention will literally spell the difference between life and death. If physicians could accurately predict tumor behavior and potential for aggression, we could more precisely choose among surgery, radiation, or watchful waiting. Unfortunately, despite great

technological strides, we do NOT currently possess such a means.

Until the means and sophistication to accurately predict the behavior of an individual prostate cancer become available, it behooves us as urologists to offer aggressive therapy to most men with this disease; otherwise, "watchful waiting" might translate into watch the cancer and wait for progression and death.

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