Dear Dr Godlee

"UK cancer survival statistics are misleading and make survival look worse than it is": rebuttal

This editorial is unfounded, untenable and inconsistent. The *BMJ* editor reports the authors were too busy to defend it[1]. The editorial is indefensible. It should be withdrawn.

The editorial is unfounded. The provocative title *"UK cancer survival statistics are misleading and make survival look worse than it is"* is pure conjecture. Conjecture becomes assertion, then conclusion, with no intervening evidence:

> "***If*** the first months or years of the illness are never traced, the earliest event registered ***may be*** some aspect of cancer recurrence. The date of this recurrence ***would*** then be taken as the date from which "survival rates" are calculated. This ***makes*** **[sic]** short term survival look misleadingly worse in the UK than in countries such as Sweden ..." ***[our emphasis]***

The editorial is untenable. It posits two errors that supposedly make UK cancer survival misleading. Full-scale simulation with the national cancer registry[2] shows that even implausibly extreme levels of the alleged errors could not account for the UK-Sweden survival deficit. Evidence refutes conjecture.

The editorial is inconsistent: one author published survival estimates for England in 1998-99 using the same cancer registry data criticised in the editorial, without mentioning these criticisms. Survival trends were interpreted (quite reasonably) as reflecting improved treatment[3]. Data quality has improved substantially since the 1990s[4]. If clinical interpretation of survival estimates derived from the National Cancer Registry was acceptable in 1999, why not now?

A misleading *BMJ* editorial by such eminent authors is not trivial. It is inappropriately cited in support of a criticism[5] that health policy aimed at improving cancer survival "fails to acknowledge *substantial methodological problems* with studies reporting these [survival] rates" *[our emphasis]*. The editorial undermines research to explain the UK cancer survival deficit, as well as policy designed to reduce the deficit. That is a disservice to cancer patients in the UK.

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5. Whitehead M, Hanratty B, Popay J. NHS reform: untried remedies for misdiagnosed problems? *Lancet* 2010; **376**: 1373-5