

The Northern Echo
The North's campaigning newspaper

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COMMENT

Car plan is miles away

BY the end of the decade car buyers will be able to purchase an electric-powered Mini. Will the model that revolutionised 1960s motoring persuade us to ditch petrol and diesel engines in favour of 'cleaner' electric cars?

Soon there may be no choice. As part of plans to improve air quality Transport Secretary Chris Grayling aims to stop sales of petrol and diesel cars by 2040. By the time this comes in Mr Grayling, and most of his cabinet colleagues, will be in their late 70s. It is laudable for ministers to plan a better environment for future generations but they're failing to tackle air pollution now. The Government should get the ball rolling by introducing scrappage schemes and clean air zones today instead of kicking the big problems into the long grass.

More immediate schemes to change road layouts or encourage people to leave their cars at home will be the responsibility of local authorities. This is a bizarre idea. Surely cleansing our air is something that needs to be a national effort rather than a piecemeal affair which abdicates responsibility to councils.

Furthermore, if we're serious about getting people out of toxin-producing cars then why isn't there a joined-up transport policy to promote that greenest of vehicles - the bicycle? A report this week noted the increased use of bikes in Darlington. This is great but like every town in Britain it is a long way from being cycle-friendly on a par with, say, The Netherlands where cyclists and motorists are regarded as equals and roads are built accordingly.

Finally, a word in Mr Grayling's defence. His electric car idea was first proposed a few weeks back by President Emmanuel Macron, of France. At least his recycled policies boast green credentials.

 **What do you think?**
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QUALITY

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Men marching for good health



The national March for Men campaign aims to raise awareness of male cancers, specifically prostate cancer. North-East GP, **Dr Zak Uddin**, discusses new advances in diagnosis and the symptoms that shouldn't be ignored

EARLIER this year popular Sky Sports presenter and Hartlepool United fan Jeff Stelling completed his latest March for Men, a trek taking in football grounds from Exeter to Newcastle to raise awareness of prostate cancer.

The March for Men campaign, backed by charity Prostate Cancer UK, aims to prompt more men with possible symptoms to come forward and seek advice from their family doctor, and comes at an exciting time, because a new blood test has been developed, which may be able to predict those men with prostate cancer whose tumour is likely to be more aggressive. The hope is that these men will be identified and offered treatment at an earlier stage, with the aim of a cure.

The research, led by Professor Li of Queen Mary's University London, and produced in the journal Clinical Cancer Research, looked at 82 patients with diagnosed prostate cancer. The new blood test detects cancer cells that have broken off from the original tumour and are circulating in the blood. Critically, this is the stage before cancer cells become fixed in other organs and structures, known as metastasis in medical jargon, and associated with poorer outcome and reduced survival.

Current definite diagnosis of prostate cancer as well as whether the tumour has spread, requires an invasive biopsy, which can be painful, as well as costly scans, which may also expose the patient to large amounts of radiation.

Prostate cancer is the most common male cancer, with almost 50,000 new diagnoses in the UK every year. Sadly more than 10,000 men will succumb to the disease annually. If picked up in the later stages, the prognosis is poor, with less than one in five surviving ten years. However, if symptoms and signs are spotted and investigated at an early stage, survival is over 90 per cent in the same time period.

Prostate cancer has sometimes been seen as part of natural ageing, with 50 per cent of men having some cancerous cells at age 50 years, and 80 per cent by the time they reach 80. However, the way the cancer develops ranges enormously from very slow growing to extremely aggressive, which is hopefully where the new blood test will be of use.

The prostate is an organ only found in men. It can be thought of as like a donut, and sat at the base of the bladder, where the urethra, or water pipe, leaves the bladder. It



MARCH: Sky Sports presenter Jeff Stelling's March for Men raised awareness of prostate cancer earlier this year

produces a fluid which mixes with semen and is required to transport them during ejaculation.

With age the prostate enlarges and the hole in the donut becomes smaller, narrowing the urethra. Symptoms are noticed as difficulty when initiating urination, a weaker flow and dribbling at the end. The confusion lies in that these same symptoms are associated with prostate cancer, which also causes the prostate to enlarge. And although these symptoms may seem vague, and indeed can be intermittent, any new symptom should not be ignored.

The first step in the diagnosis of prostate cancer is a rectal examination, the prostate being located just in front of the rectum. This will detect if the prostate is enlarged, and if it is smooth, suggestive of benign enlargement, or irregular and craggy, which points more in the direction of possible cancer. The prostate specific antigen or PSA investigation, a blood test, has come under much scrutiny of late, as normal levels do not necessarily rule out cancer, and indeed raised levels do not definitely indicate cancer, with urinary tract infections and even sexual intercourse raising the PSA level in the blood. Currently, if a patient's examination is abnormal and/or PSA level raised, he will be offered an urgent referral to urolo-

gist for a prostate biopsy to get a definite diagnosis.

Treatment is very dependent on the stage of cancer at time of diagnosis, and can range from watchful waiting, whereby the PSA is checked routinely, through to radical surgery involving complete removal of the prostate. For those cases where spread has occurred by the time of diagnosis, specialists are able to offer radiotherapy. Hormone therapy, usually by injection, is used to treat those tumours whose growth seems to be linked to testosterone.

There isn't any advice other than maintaining your personal health that has been shown to reduce the likelihood of prostate cancer, although we know that obesity and excess alcohol are linked with all types of cancer.

Men whose brothers have suffered prostate cancer are two and a half times more likely to develop it compared to the background population, and although the average age of diagnosis is 65 to 69, it can occur at any age. My advice is to be aware of your own body, and if you develop symptoms as described above, to address them with your routine GP in a timely fashion.

Useful websites prostatecanceruk.org, www.pcf.org and www.tackleprostate.org

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Dr Zak Uddin