Cancer is a major public health and economic issue and its burden is set to spiral. With over 18 million cases in 2018, we can expect 29 million cases by 2040 due to the aging and growth of the population.

Worldwide, there were an estimated 18.1 million cases and 9.6 million cancer deaths in 2018 (including non-melanoma skin cancers), with one in four men and one in five women developing the disease, and one in eight men and one in eleven women dying from it. In addition, there were 43.8 million people living with cancer in 2018 who were diagnosed within the last 5 years.

Half of the new cancer cases and cancer deaths in the world occur in Asia. China, with the largest population size in the region and worldwide—a 4 billion inhabitants, representing 19% of the global population in 2018—has the greatest global proportion of new cases (4.5 million cases, 6% of the total) and deaths (2.6 million deaths, 28%). Northern America is second in terms of new cases (3.4 million, 16%), and fourth for cancer deaths (0.7 million, 7%). Close to one-fourth of all new cases globally (4.2 million) and one-fifth of deaths (1.5 million) occur in Europe, despite the region representing less than one-tenth of the global population.

For both sexes combined worldwide, lung cancer continues to be the most commonly diagnosed cancer (3.1 million, 21% of the total) and the leading cause of cancer death (1.8 million, 19%) because of its poor prognosis. Female breast cancer is the second most common cancer overall (2.1 million, 38%) but the fifth leading cause of cancer death (755,000, 7%) because of its relatively favorable prognosis. As such, it is the most prevalent cancer worldwide (6.9 million women living within 5 years of their breast cancer diagnosis). Colorectal cancer is the third most frequently diagnosed cancer globally, but second only to lung cancer in terms of mortality (0.8 million cases and 0.5 million deaths). Prostate cancer is the fourth most frequently diagnosed cancer, while stomach and liver cancer remain major causes of cancer death in 2018.

Based on projected population aging and growth, the global burden of cancer is set to increase by more than twofold by 2040, from 18.1 million new cases in 2018 to 79 countries in an additional 2040.* More broadly, cancer has become a leading cause of death over the last few decades. In terms of premature mortality (defined as death in ages 30–69 years), in the year 2016, cancer was the third most common cause of premature mortality (18.1 million new cases in 2018 to a predicted 30–69 years), in the year 2016, cancer was the year 2016, cancer was the third most frequently-diagnosed cancer (including non-melanoma skin cancers), with one in four men and one in five women developing the disease, and one in eight men and one in eleven women dying from it. In addition, there were 43.8 million people living with cancer in 2018 who were diagnosed within the last 5 years.

Cancer ranks as the first or second leading cause of premature death (among those 30–69 years of age) in 134 countries of the world.

The global cancer burden is dominated by Europe, China, and Northern America.

Cancer is overdue. Further delays will mean needless deaths, worsening inequities, and a failure to realise health, economic, and societal benefits.

— Rifat Atun, global health systems expert, and Franco Cavalli, medical oncologist

An inclusive and coordinated large-scale global response to fight cancer is overdue. Further delays will mean needless deaths, worsening inequities, and a failure to realise health, economic, and societal benefits.

— Rifat Atun, global health systems expert, and Franco Cavalli, medical oncologist

MAP 10.3
The number of new cancer cases in 2018 vs. 2040: impact of demographic projections by age

Number of new cancer cases in 2018 vs. 2040: impact of demographic projections by age

Based on population growth and aging, the global cancer burden will grow to 29.4 million cases annually in 2040 (assuming global rates in 2018 remain unchanged).

FIGURE 10.4
Top 5 cancers worldwide in 2018 (incidence, mortality and prevalence of new cases)

Top 5 cancers worldwide in 2018 (incidence, mortality and prevalence of new cases)

*Estimated on the basis of the latest available data.