

Cancer scenarios

Taking a family history can enable you to discuss with the patient and family the possibility of a genetic basis to their diagnosis. Patients are often concerned at the possible implications for other family members.

Scenario 1

John is talking to the practice nurse about his concerns because bowel cancer runs in his family. Following the drawing of a family history it can be seen why he is concerned.

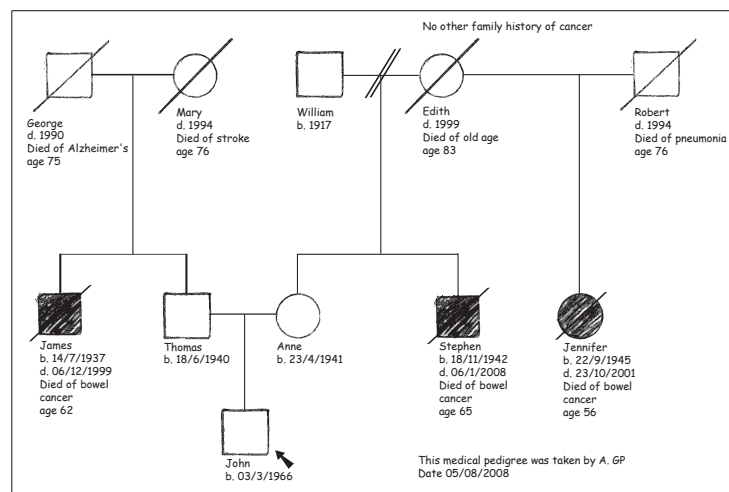


Fig. 1 Scenario 1

Three family members have died of bowel cancer. It would be important to identify the site of these cancers to see if they are indeed the same, which would increase the chance that these are due to the same genetic condition.

However, the three people are not related to one another as first degree family members e.g. parent or full sibling. And there is no evidence of cancer in the closer relatives, or in other generations, which might suggest an increased genetic risk. This pedigree (Fig. 1) therefore demonstrates the importance of considering three generations within a family history. Using the UK National Guidelines, John's risk would be considered low and whilst he may be offered advice and monitoring, unless symptomatic it would be unlikely he would be offered any invasive screening techniques.

Scenario 2

Jane is attending the oncology clinic as she has found a breast lump. She talks to you about her fears for her two young daughters as there seems to be so much cancer in the family.

You suggest drawing a family pedigree; an example of this pedigree can be found on the next page (Fig. 2).

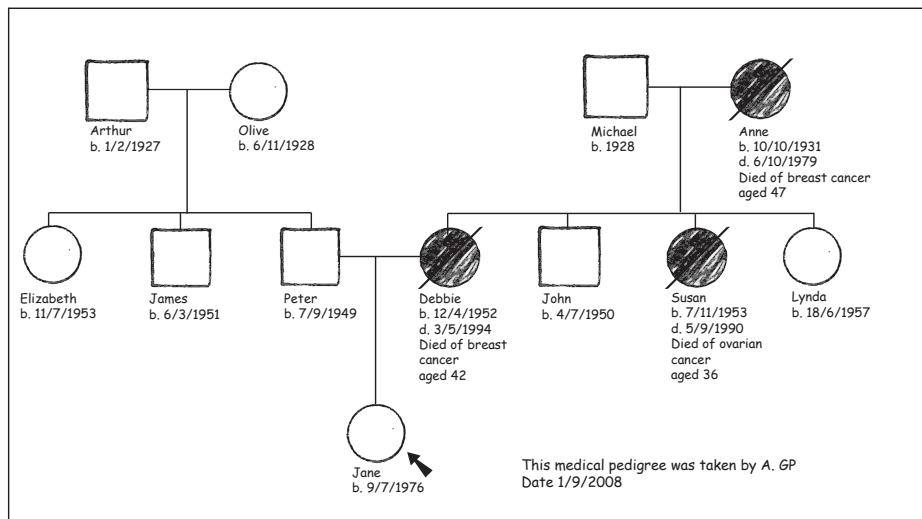


Fig. 2 Scenario 2

On taking a genetic family history it is clear that there is a possible pattern within her family. You discuss that whilst you could give her a probability of there being a genetic predisposition in the family based on published information obtained from studies of many families, it is impossible to say there is a definitive genetic cause without further investigations.

If following her biopsy breast cancer is diagnosed, you would want to discuss with Jane the services available for genetic investigations and the way that referrals are made.