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The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is the specialized cancer agency of the World Health Organization with the objective of promoting international collaboration in cancer research. To fulfill such mission, the IARC publishes series of handbooks covering different aspects of cancer prevention. The latest was IARC Handbook on Cancer Prevention – Volume 17 Colorectal Cancer Screening. This volume is the first IARC Handbook on colorectal cancer (CRC) prevention, with the aim of evaluating the current evidence regarding the preventive effectiveness of colorectal cancer screening procedures in population-based programmes or in opportunistic settings, taking into account the balance of benefit and harm in the target populations. IARC Handbooks on Cancer Prevention: Colorectal Cancer Screening is a guide for public health organizations that are considering, developing, conducting, or evaluating organized population-wide colorectal cancer screening programs.

A working group of 23 independent international experts met at the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) on 14–21 November 2017 to review the body of evidence and set final evaluations. A summary of the outcomes was published as a Special Report in The New England Journal of Medicine in March 2018, ahead of the book print, and was also presented at the Saudi–International Colorectal disease forum and the 2nd Combined Gulf Cancer Conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in March 2018.

The Handbook starts with a well-illustrated description of the global burden of colorectal cancer worldwide, in terms of incidence, mortality, survival, and future projections; this is followed by information on cancer–related survival in numerous countries, and the known risk and protective factors for colorectal cancer. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the current availability and use of colorectal cancer screening presented by WHO regions, which may prove useful to any organization that is planning a future screening program.

Chapters 3 is the core of the book and is divided into several parts. After a presentation of the major methodological considerations necessary to evaluate screening studies, it includes a comprehensive review of all published studies on CRC screening that assessed stool–based methods, endoscopic methods, and CT colonography with regards to both primary and secondary prevention (reducing the incidence of CRC or reducing mortality from colorectal cancer), the balance of benefit and harm, and adverse effects in average–risk populations. This chapter also covers recent reviews of the cost–effectiveness of these methods compared to no screening in different settings.

These core chapters are followed by a review on additional comparative studies of endoscopic techniques versus stool–based techniques, determinants of participation to screening programmes, surveillance of populations at increased risk of colorectal cancer, and a brief consideration of emerging techniques that are not yet routinely in use.

Summaries of each of the preceding chapters are given in Chapter 4. Although placed towards the end of the book, these summaries resemble an executive summary and provide the reader with an immediate access to the content of each chapter in a succinct yet scientifically precise manner.

The outcome of the evaluations of existing methods for colorectal cancer screening is outlined in Chapter 5 with standard terminology as defined by the IARC and recognized internationally.

All currently–used methods can significantly reduce the risk of mortality from colorectal cancer, and the endoscopic techniques can also significantly reduce the risk of developing cancer by the concomitant removal
of precancerous lesions. These evidence–base findings can strongly support the efforts of stakeholders actively engaged in CRC control initiatives.

The unique value of the IARC handbook is that it reviews colorectal cancer screening from the perspective of public health policy. The publication contains international data that are otherwise not easily available from one comprehensive source and also provides an invaluable source of references, amounting to 2300 articles cited. Screening for colorectal cancer by either endoscopy or fecal occult blood tests can substantially reduce colorectal cancer mortality among men and women in any country that is able to implement properly a program for screening and treatment. This handbook should be crucial in helping countries to achieve their goals with future strategic plans to improve current screening programs or to start planning future colorectal cancer control programs aiming at lowering burden of colorectal cancer.