Cancer diagnosed during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Faroe Islands

Marnar Fríðheim Kristiansen[1,2,3], Maria Skaalum Petersen[*,1,4], Marin Strøm[*,1,5]

* Shared last author

1 Centre of Health Science, University of the Faroe Islands; 2 National Hospital of the Faroe Islands; 3 COVID-19 Task force, Ministry of Health, Faroe Islands;
4 Department of Occupational Medicine and Public Health, The Faroese Hospital System, Faroe Islands; 5 Department of Epidemiology Research, Statens Serum Institut, Denmark

Introduction:

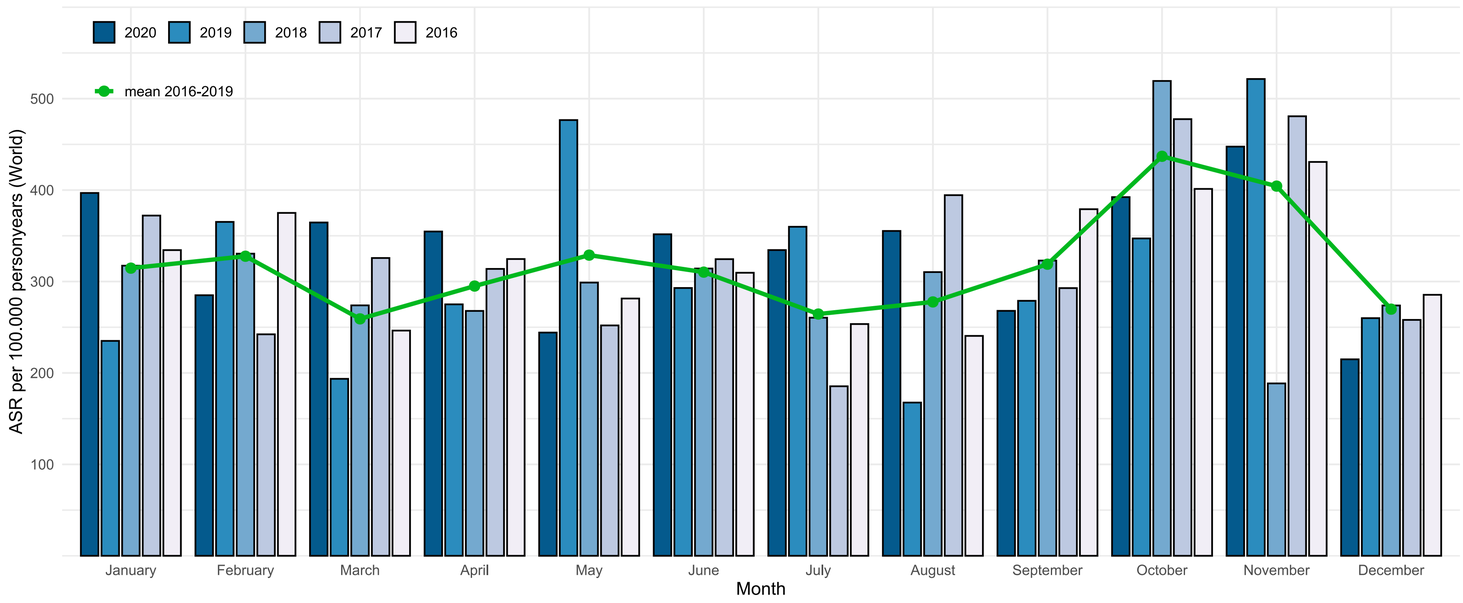
During 2020 a decrease in cancer incidence has been observed in Denmark, the Netherlands, the US and other countries, most likely due to underdiagnosing or delayed diagnosing of cancer during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study investigates if there was a decrease in new cancer cases in the Faroe Islands during the pandemic. The Faroe Islands have had a more aggressive strategy towards COVID-19 than most neighbouring countries and have successfully eliminated the contagion several times, which could impact if the same decrease is seen here as elsewhere.

Conclusion:

No decrease in the incidence of cancer diagnoses in the Faroe Islands was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which underlines the importance of timely handling of the COVID-19 pandemic to prevent COVID-19 and prevent indirect effects on the remaining health sector.

Monthly age standardized cancer incidence rates from 2016-2020



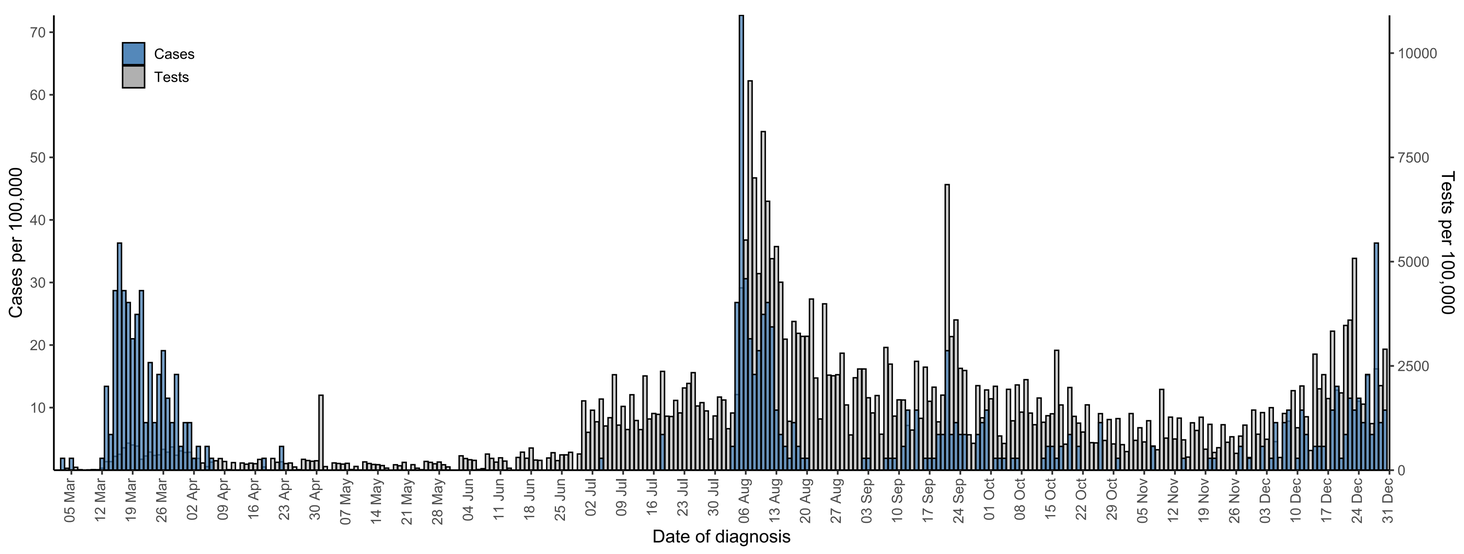
ASR: Age standardized rate per 100,000 person years
Age standardized rates for cancer is shown by month. The rate in 2020 is in dark blue. The mean for 2016-2019 is shown as the green line. The period before (January and February) the pandemic is shown with a higher opacity.

Comparison of age standardised cancer incidence rates and incidence rate ratios for 2020 and 2016-19

Month	Cases 2020 (n)	Cases 2016-2019 (n)	ASR 2020	ASR 2016- 2019	IRR	95% CI
January	31	96	397	315	1.26	0.84 – 1.89
February	23	98	285	328	0.87	0.55 – 1.37
March	31	81	365	259	1.41	0.93 – 2.13
April	28	93	355	295	1.20	0.79 – 1.83
May	23	101	244	329	0.74	0.47 – 1.17
June	27	90	352	310	1.13	0.74 – 1.74
July	28	81	334	264	1.26	0.82 – 1.94
August	25	93	355	278	1.28	0.82 – 1.99
September	20	103	268	319	0.84	0.52 – 1.36
October	33	140	392	437	0.90	0.61 – 1.31
November	36	122	448	404	1.11	0.76 – 1.62
December	17	80	215	270	0.80	0.47 – 1.34
Overall	322	1178	334	317	1.05	0.93 – 1.19

ASR: Age standardized rate per 100,000 person years, IRR: Incidence rate ratio, CI: Confidence interval
There is no significant difference in rate, comparing the rate in 2020 to the mean rate from the previous four years. The highest IRR is in March 2020 and the lowest during in September 2020. Case numbers for 2020 and 2016-2019 are also shown here.

Overview of the COVID-19 epidemic in the Faroe Islands in 2020



All confirmed COVID-19 cases and RT-PCR tests are shown here illustrating the course of the COVID-19 epidemic in the Faroe Islands during 2020. Note, that there are two separate y-axes. There were 4 spikes of cases in all, with especially large spikes during March-April, August and December and a smaller increase in September. Testing was high during the whole epidemic but increased markedly in August and onwards as a response to a second wave.

Methods:

All new cases of cancer registered in the electronic health record were included. Monthly incidence in 2020 was compared to corresponding rates in the previous four years. Incidence rate ratios and 95% confidence intervals were calculated to evaluate any significant difference.

Results:

There was no statistically significant difference in the number of diagnosed cancers in 2020 during the months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Faroe Islands, when compared to the previous four years.

Discussion:

Some fluctuations in the number of cases across months were observed, e.g., the number of incident cases was higher in March and fell below the mean from previous years later. However, variations like these are to be expected in data from a small population such as the Faroe Islands, and there was no statistically significant decrease or increase in cancer incidence in 2020 compared to previous years.

The incidence of new cancers during 2020 did not differ from previous years in the Faroe Islands, which is a situation different from several other countries. The main reason for these findings is likely to be the timely and reactive handling of the COVID-19 epidemic in the Faroe Islands.

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Marnar Fríðheim Kristiansen, MD
Centre of Health Science, University of the Faroe Islands
J.C. Svabos gøta 14, 100 Tórshavn, Faroe Islands
Email: marfr@ls.fo

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