

## **How long have I got? Take a blood test** **White Coat, Black Art, November 28, 2016**

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### **Summary<sup>1</sup>**

Doctors are notoriously bad at predicting how much time we have left to live. A study published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal in the fall 2016, suggests that a blood test for inflammatory biomarkers, such as interleukin-6 (IL-6), C-reactive protein (CRP) and alpha1-acid glycoprotein (AGP), may be able to predict more precisely whether a patient has an increased risk of dying within, for example, the next five or ten years. Inflammation can track the development and progression of several serious conditions, including heart attack, Crohn's disease and cancer. At this point in time tests for inflammatory biomarkers are used amongst others by heart specialists to screen patients risk for heart attacks, or to decide what, if any, cholesterol lowering drug to prescribe. Doctors are not yet using these tests to advice patients about how long they have left to live. Should they? In this podcast of White Coat, Black Art, Dr. Bryan Goldman discusses the problems around interpreting test results and the risks associated with using it to predict a patient's likelihood of surviving.

Duration: 7 min. 11 sec.

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Find episode here: <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/whitecoat/pastepisodes>

### **Questions for discussion:**

- What might be the value of knowing your risk of dying within five years?
- Is it unethical to use the biomarker test to predict a patient's risk of dying, when it is still unknown if normalising the biomarkers will increase the chances of survival?
- What are the ethical implications associated with offering this test widely, for example in direct-to-consumer lab tests?
- One of Dr. Goldman's concerns around the biomarker test is the way the information is being interpreted and used. Should there be limits as to who can offer tests for biomarkers?

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from summary posted on White Coat, Black Art's program website.