CALL TO ACTION STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE PRESS RELEASE:

Nairobi, 19th June 2020

CANCER AND COVID-19: THE FIRST 100 DAYS
THROUGH THE EYES OF A CANCER PATIENT, CAREGIVER & SURVIVOUR

Introduction:
Today marks one hundred (100) days since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Kenya. Since then the number of COVID-19 cases has risen gradually to over 4,200 with slightly over 115 COVID-19 related deaths. The World Health Organization (WHO) has documented that people with pre-existing conditions such as cancer are among the most-at-risk of COVID-19 mortalities due to a compromised immune system. Cancer in the third (3rd) leading cause of death in Kenya, with 134 new cases being diagnosed per day and 92 people dying every day. These are more people than those that are contracting COVID-19 or dying from it respectively on a daily basis in Kenya.

The Government continues to uphold stringent COVID-19 control measures such as travel bans, closure of borders, and several social distancing measures. Amidst these, major challenges have arisen in cancer control which are:

a. to ensure access to vital cancer screening, treatment and medication, avoiding delay that could lead to disease progression and poor outcomes, but at the same time safeguarding cancer patients from the COVID-19 infection.

b. increased vulnerabilities of cancer patients who were already grappling with the high cost of treatment and now faced with new challenges like loss of livelihoods, high cost of transport, food insecurity among others.

c. increased mental health and anguish due to the fear of COVID-19 infections, shielding requirements and social distancing requirements that deny them much-needed care as well as regular psychosocial support.

d. risk of national resources for the fight against cancer being diverted to COVID-19 response.

We applaud the Government, through the National Cancer Control Program for moving with speed and releasing cancer management guidelines in the face of COVID-19 pandemic in April. KENCO also appreciates efforts by the Government to provide personal protective equipment to cancer centers and redistribution of cancer medication to regional cancer treatment centers for ease of access by patients. We however, urge the government to ACT NOW in matters cancer control to ensure that positive strides made in cancer diagnosis, treatment and control over the years, do not go down the drain in a few months.
Support to access Cancer treatment:
Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) remains the only public health facility providing comprehensive cancer treatment services. Due to restriction of movement into and out of the Nairobi Metropolitan area and county borders' police patrols, cancer patients are unable to easily access cancer services at KNH and if they do, it comes at a high travel cost due to unavailability of public transportation and most times with delay in arrival.

In the short-term, we call upon the Ministry of Health (MoH) and County Governments to offer transport and travel passes to cancer patients who need access to critical, life-saving cancer care services at KNH during this period. In the medium and long-term, we call upon the Ministry of Health to strengthen regional cancer centers to offer comprehensive cancer services.

Cancer and COVID-19:
We appreciate the Government for enacting mandatory COVID-19 screening in all public hospitals in a bid to speedily identify new cases across the country. We are however concerned with the challenges this has caused in the swift support of cancer patients. Delays and loss to follow up have been noted in some facilities where a cancer patient presents for treatment but has to undergo screening and sometimes isolation before accessing cancer care and treatment.

We call on MoH to carefully triage patients to ensure that cancer patients needing critical support are not delayed in COVID-19 isolation wards.

Cancer Education, Screening and HPV Vaccination and introduction of Wellness Centres:
We applaud the National and County Governments for timely and continuous implementation of measures to suppress the transmission of COVID-19 in Kenya. We specifically applaud MoH for the design of firm prevention strategies including evoking the Kenya Public Health Act, 1986 (Revised 2012), facilitating COVID-19 education, counselling and testing of those at risk of infection and training healthcare workers to manage the disease. We are however, concerned about the numerous lost chances that have occurred in cancer education and screening among the population that has voluntarily offered themselves to get screened for COVID-19.

We urge the Government not to treat diseases in silos and consider implementing a Wellness System/Structure. Every county facility should have a wellness screening centre to capture Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD's) at early stages. The same population that was educated on COVID-19 could have been taught key risk factors and prevention strategies for cancer. The same woman (aged 25-49 years old) who was screened for COVID-19 could have concurrently been screened for cervical and breast cancer. Young girls (aged 10 years) would also have received the HPV vaccination. We call on government to use human, time and financial resources more effectively and achieve greater all-round health outcomes.

Increased Human Resource Capacity:
We task the Government to increase Human Resource capacity in county facilities to reduce stretched facilities at the KNH Chemotherapy clinic. This will reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection for cancer patients who will not need to travel all the way to Nairobi for treatment at KNH, in addition to saving the transport costs and costs of relocating to Nairobi for treatment.
We also task the Government to increase Human Resource capacity in the Radiotherapy clinic at KNH so the clinic can run seven days a week. The Government should also take advantage of idle capacity in private hospitals through Public-Private Partnerships to reduce the stretched capacity at KNH.

**Tobacco and Alcohol Control:**
Tobacco and Alcohol use are key risk factors for cancer. During this pandemic, the government unfortunately has listed these products as being essential, despite them having adverse health, social and economic effects including being major risk factors linked to cancer. The government has also gone ahead to receive donations from the tobacco industry into the COVID-19 emergency response fund, which is contravening the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control of which Kenya is a signatory, as well as the Kenya Tobacco Control Act 2007 and the Kenya Tobacco Control Regulations 2014.

We urge the government to delist these products from the essential products list and in addition decline the above-named donation. Cancer prevention is better and much affordable than treatment and rehabilitation.

**Personal Protective Equipment:**
The World Health Organizations has documented that use of face masks is part of a comprehensive package of the prevention and control measures that can limit the spread of COVID-19. In addition to this, other personal and community level measures such as handwashing with soap, frequent use of sanitizers and social distancing should also be adopted to suppress further COVID-19 infections. Cancer patients, caregivers and survivors are already economically drained from cancer itself and will need support to access face masks, sanitizers, soap and clean running water, which they urgently require given their lowered ability to fight infections.

We also call on both the National and county governments to continue providing personal protective equipment to oncology health workers in cancer centers and through established cancer support groups where cancer patients and survivors can access them.

**Financial and Food aid:**
Kenco is concerned about social protection for vulnerable cancer patients and survivors. Cancer treatment and care is financially draining and especially so during this COVID-19 period when people have lost livelihoods thus affecting their access to treatment and to the much-needed nutritious immunity-boosting diets. Current data shows that cancer patients attending care at the regional county hospitals are approximately 1,300 while those at Kenyatta National Hospital and Moi Teaching and Referral hospital (combined) are approximately 3,700 thus a total of approximately 5,000 cancer patients who need social protection.

We call on the Government to enroll vulnerable cancer patients, especially those living in poor neighborhoods such as Nairobi informal settlements and the coastal region, which are COVID-19 hotspots and where food security markers are low, in the COVID-19 cash transfer programme launched a month ago.
Disability recognition:
Cancer has different types of treatment, one of them being surgical. Patients and survivors that have been through bone cancer, breast cancer, colorectal cancer, retinoblastoma among others have lost key body parts such as limbs, breasts, eyes, just to name a few. These disabilities complicate their lives and affect their day to day operations.

It is time that the government recognized such cancer patients and survivors among the disabled populations and consequently facilitate them to enjoy the stipulated privileges as per the Persons with Disabilities Act, 2003.

Critical Cancer medicines and Commodities:
Cancer patients and survivors need vital drugs and medical supplies or commodities such as breast prosthesis, compression stockings and stoma bags to lead a normal lifestyle. Due to travel bans and closure of national borders there is a looming stock out of some imported commodities such as donor-sponsored stoma bags for people who have been through colorectomy.

We urge the government to ensure that cancer products including palliative care comfort medication are prioritized in the supply chain, for the sake of cancer patients getting their life-saving treatment and care. In addition to ensuring adequate supplies of cancer drugs and medical supplies, we urge the Government through Kenya Medical Supplies Agency (KEMSA) to look into the size and quality of the stoma bags, voice prosthesis and breast prosthesis as well as compression stockings.

Use of Technology in Palliative Care:
Cancer patients on palliative care have physical, financial, social and spiritual needs that need to be addressed by their close family members with support from trained palliative care health workers. Due to social distancing rules and limited access to health facilities to visit the sick, cancer patients under palliative care are facing great isolation and mental torture.

We urge the government to be innovative and use technology such as smart phones and laptops that can be provided in public health centres and cancer hospices. Patients can then get a chance to discuss critical issues with their loved ones online and have restful days.

National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) for children newly diagnosed with cancer
Despite the COVID -19 pandemic, cancer diagnosis among children is still ongoing in various hospitals in Kenya. Every year about 3,500 children are diagnosed with cancer in Kenya. Unfortunately, only 30% are likely to survive due to late diagnosis. Families continue to cite financial difficulties as the main reason why many children diagnosed with cancer do not start treatment or discontinue treatment. Many families are unable to afford the high cost of treatment or health insurance to cover the cost, as well as the expensive travel and accommodation costs. Sadly, this becomes a daunting choice for parents – whether to pay for treatment costs or cater for the rest of the family’s needs like food, shelter and education.

We urge the government to consider waiving NHIF fees for children newly diagnosed with cancer during this pandemic.
This will give them a relief considering they have spent a fortune is getting the correct diagnosis through numerous expensive diagnostic tests and hospital visits. This will also ensure they access timely treatment.

**Conclusion:**

Compared with other Non-Communicable diseases, cancer is the most catastrophic in healthcare expenditure. The Patient journey in cancer is very costly as many patients come in at late stages. Taking into account the number of visits a patient has to go through to be diagnosed, the transport costs and costs of treatment, all this can be overwhelming and usually expose the patient to financial hardship. A patient will usually have to translocate themselves from their home setting to a specialized centre to collect biopsy and to seek treatment.

We call on communities to continue supporting cancer patients, their caregivers and survivors during this difficult period.

Successful Cancer control response will need urgency and commitment from the government. It calls for immense political will, multi-sectoral involvement and effective policy changes to ensure that the cancer epidemic in Kenya, right from prevention to survivorship, is dealt with the same zeal as COVID-19.

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**Notes for Editors.**

The Kenyan Network of Cancer Organizations is the National umbrella body of over 35 cancer civil society organizations that are active in various aspects of cancer control, spread across the country and committed to a unified approach towards cancer control. [www.kenconetwork.org](http://www.kenconetwork.org); Phone: +254799400875.

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