



## **PRESS RELEASE.**

***For immediate release:***

Nairobi, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2022.

### **CANCER AND COVID-19: TWO YEARS INTO THE PANDEMIC A HEALTH CATASTROPHE IN THE WAITING.**

#### **Introduction:**

Recently, on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2022, Kenya marked exactly two years since the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in the country. We applaud the Government for the measures that were taken immediately after and since then to contain the spread and management of the disease in the country. This has paid off and the COVID-19 positivity rate has drastically gone down.

Sadly, this success cannot be shared in cancer control. COVID-19 gravely disrupted the health system; health workforce and infrastructure, supply chain, service provision, and patient access to cancer care across the continuum of care were dramatically affected. Civil society in cancer control and oncology professionals urge the Government to urgently take up critical steps to mitigate the adverse effects COVID-19 has had on cancer control. Losing one cancer patient every fifteen minutes is a very significant statistic affecting families and cascading the burden to the nation.

The following areas were affected during the COVID 19 period:

#### **Cancer Education and Screening:**

In the last two years, due to COVID-19 prevention guidelines that were in place, we have noted an alarming reduction in cancer screening and delays in diagnosis and treatment. This has caused backlogs that in the long run, will mean new patients are likely to be diagnosed with advanced symptoms leading to serious and poor health outcomes. HPV vaccination numbers are also low, with cases of expiring vaccines; each missed opportunity might translate to a preventable and painful cancer case in the future.

We urge the Ministry of Health to fully and rapidly resume and revamp provision of cancer screening and diagnostic services, to maintain public education on the need for cancer prevention and to provide a safe environment for treatment.

We call upon members of the public to actively seek cancer screening services which are available in most county referral facilities to improve chances of early detection and better treatment outcomes. We encourage the public to engage in healthier lifestyle and diets that lower cancer risks. We encourage the public to become more aware of and avoid behavioural risk factors such as alcohol and tobacco use, consumption of unhealthy diets and insufficient physical activity.

#### **Availability and cost of cancer care:**

We recognize the efforts that the Government has taken to progressively improve availability of cancer services in public health facilities. We however call on the Ministry of Health, to expedite service provision in the 4 marked radiotherapy centres to ease the pressure on the 3 national referral facilities and promote access to these important services.

We urge the Government to put in place mechanisms in all these centres to ensure breakdowns of machines, such as was recently reported at Kenyatta National Hospital for radiotherapy and brachytherapy machines, is avoided in future. The effect of breakdowns is that cancer patients who need these services are rendered helpless for prolonged period of time.

We also call upon the Government to ensure that cancer products and medicines are prioritized and in the supply chain cost subsidized, and that frequent stock-outs as has been the case in the recent past, should be avoided.

#### **Palliative Care for Cancer Patients:**

Palliative care is a human right that every Kenyan in need should have access to. There is growing demand for palliative care services as the number of Kenyans with disease, including cancer increases. Every hour six people are diagnosed with cancer and they need palliative care, which includes access to pain relief medicines and psychosocial support.

We urge the Government to finance palliative care services, not only at health facility units, but also to support hospice-care and home-based service providers to provide the continuum of care outside the hospital for patients. This continuous support at home and community will improve the patient's quality of life.

#### **Tobacco, Alcohol and Sugar-sweetened beverages Control:**

Tobacco and alcohol use and eating of unhealthy diets are key risk factors for cancer. During this pandemic, the government unfortunately listed some of these products as essential products, despite them having adverse health, social and economic effects.

We urge the Government to instead increase tax from these industries, to increase government revenue and use the new resources in health preventive and rehabilitative programmes. Studies have consistently shown that raising taxes on these products, increases their prices, making them less affordable. This in turn limits consumption of the same thus helping addicts quit and preventing non-users, especially young people, women, and the poor, from ever starting. Cancer prevention is better and more affordable than rehabilitation.

#### **Cancer amongst older populations:**

Cancer can develop at any age, but the incidence of cancer rises steadily with age. In Africa, cancer among the old accounts for about 29% of total cases and 36% of all cancer related deaths. This proportion is however expected to increase in the coming years as the population ages- Kenya included.

The Government must focus on cancer and ageing now by ensuring that age-appropriate cancer services are available and that older cancer patients are not neglected for younger ones who may have a better prognosis. Managing cancer among the older populations is challenging and requires a multi-disciplinary team which the Government should ensure is available. Age should never be a barrier to accessing cancer care.

#### **Conclusion:**

As we shake off the COVID-19 pandemic, we call on the government, to urgently direct huge support towards cancer control with the same zeal it dealt with COVID-19. We need immense political will, both private and public multi-sectoral involvement, effective financing and increased support for cancer technologies, clinical trials and research to ensure that the cancer epidemic in Kenya, right from prevention to survivorship, is addressed. We need to act now and salvage what has been left by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Notes for Editors:**

The Kenyan Network of Cancer Organizations is the National umbrella body of over 40 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. Media Contacts: Catherine Wachira - [cathywachira@gmail.com](mailto:cathywachira@gmail.com); or Christine Mugo-Sitati - [christine@kenconetwork.org](mailto:christine@kenconetwork.org)

Kenya Hospices and Palliative Care association (KEHPCA) exists to promote access to quality palliative care for all in need across the country. With over 15 years of dedicated advocacy for palliative care, KEHPCA is a powerful voice for persons living with palliative care needs. Media contact: Mackuline-[mackuline.atieno@kehpc.org](mailto:mackuline.atieno@kehpc.org) / [info@kehpc.org](mailto:info@kehpc.org). Phone +254722507 219.

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