

30TH March 2020

CANCER TREATMENT SERVICES IN KENYA DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Background:

Kenya is currently grappling with a double challenge of COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic and Cancer, which is the third leading cause of death in Kenya, with a Kenyan dying every 15 minutes. The Latest data across the world, shows that cancer is among one of the more serious comorbidities that increase risks with respect to COVID-19; due to a weakened immune system.

The rapid and global spread of the virus is forcing governments including Kenya, to take unprecedented measures such as travel bans, closure of borders, restricted contact between individuals, curfews and lockdowns as well as reduce access to hospitals to avoid straining health systems. Therefore, cancer patients who contract the coronavirus, experiencing potentially more severe symptoms, may not receive the treatment for COVID-19 that they need.

Call to action:

The Kenyan Network of Cancer Organizations (KENCO) urges the Kenyan government to recognize the importance and the value of integrating non-communicable diseases, cancer included, into the response of COVID-19. Bold initiatives throughout the health sector and not simply from within the infectious-diseases programme are necessary for this integration to be successful.

a. Resources for Cancer Control:

In the recent past, we have noted that both the National and County governments have moved with speed to allocate supplementary budgets in their efforts to fight the spread of the coronavirus. This is commendable and a show of commitment.

We urge the government to ensure that resources will not be diverted from cancer control since cancer control programs too need sufficient, well-allocated resources now, more than ever, to ensure smooth operations in cancer control at all levels of care.

b. Use of Virtual Network services

It is important that cancer patients continue to be managed for their condition; apart from regular medication, they also need various routine tests, dietary advice, psychosocial support as well as continuous cancer education.

In a bid to minimise time spent in hospital, we call upon the government to ensure that the above said services can be conducted at lower levels of healthcare or have oncology consultations conducted remotely via telephone, virtually or home visits. This will need the health records teams to work closely with oncology practitioners across the country; an investment that will be useful even after the pandemic is over.

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c. Provision of Chemotherapy and Radiotherapy:

Cancer patients require vital life-saving treatment such as surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy for their survival despite the treatment being a risk factor for COVID-19 infection. According to a recent article (dated 25th March 2020) by the Kenya Society of Hematology and Oncology (KESHO), *“Recommendations for physicians caring for cancer patients during COVID-19 pandemic”* there is no current evidence to suggest that these treatments should be withheld; delaying them can have a negative effects in the patients in terms of tumour progression.

We therefore urge the Ministry of Health to urgently come up with guidance that will allow for the uninterrupted treatment and care of both new and regular cancer patients while at the same time observing measures to minimize the risk of them contracting COVID-19 infection. In this, we propose that the Ministry:

- (i) explore Public-Private-Partnerships and utilize the ‘idle capacity’ of Private hospitals and cancer centers for more patients to receive cancer treatment and have the costs covered by the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF);
- (ii) increase the number of days for chemotherapy services in the various chemotherapy centers across the country, in order to cover more patients, while minimizing patient interactions to reduce risk of exposure.
- (iii) extend the hours that radiotherapy and chemotherapy services are given at Kenyatta National Hospital (being the biggest referral hospital in Kenya) beyond 5.00pm and into the weekend. This will require increased human resource capacity but will take care of the many cases that currently remain unattended to.

d. Access to cancer medicines and commodities

Due to panic purchases, travel bans, closure of borders and the national shift to COVID-19 response there is a high likelihood of stock-outs of critical cancer medicines and commodities.

We urge the government to ensure that cancer products are prioritized in the supply chain, for the sake of cancer patients getting their life- saving treatment.

e. Support to Oncology health workers

Reports from across the globe indicate that medical staff have physical and mental exhaustion, the torment of difficult triage decisions, and the pain of losing patients and co-workers, all in addition to the infection risk of COVID-19 both for themselves, their families and patients. In Kenya, government directives such as school closures, social distancing policies, and disruption in the availability of food and other essentials is a reality for them too.

We urge the government to ensure the safety of all health-care workers including those in oncology departments. Adequate provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is just the first step; other practical measures must be considered, including provision of food, rest, family support and psychological support.

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f. Food and Financial Support to Cancer patients

Following government travel restrictions and advisories on social distancing, a number of Kenyans have lost their daily livelihoods or seen a reduction in their daily income; cancer patients and/or their caregivers among them.

We urge the government to look at measures that can support families of people living with chronic diseases; including provision of free food rations, cash vouchers and financial support to access medicines.

Beyond the above, KENCO advises cancer patients to:

- consult with their health practitioner with regard to maintaining scheduled cancer treatment appointments; not more than one caregiver to accompany a cancer patient to treatment;
- urgently inform their oncology provider if they develop the COVID-19 symptoms especially respiratory symptoms;
- if their family members develop COVID-19 symptoms, they should isolate themselves.
- avoid public transportation and travel only when necessary; avoid gatherings; have enough medication and stay at home as much as possible.
- take all measures to protect hands, mouth, eyes, handwashing with soap and running water (for at least 20 seconds), sanitize and keenly practice social distancing;
- plan ahead with healthcare workers and family members to address possible emergency needs, making sure any necessary documentation (NHIF and insurance cards, medical treatment plans, prescriptions etc.) is easily available;
- keep the immune system as strong as possible: get enough sleep (ideally eight hours): engage in exercise if possible; eat healthy; make sure other potential medical conditions (diabetes, hypertension) are under control; and avoid mental and physical stress.

-End-

Christine Mugo Sitati-31st March 2020

The Kenyan Network of Cancer Organizations is the National umbrella body of over 35 cancer civil society organizations that are active in different aspects of cancer control, spread across the country and committed to a unified approach towards cancer control. www.kenconetwork.org

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