



Family Digest 53

February 2023

World Cancer Day

Cancer is a public health issue of major concern. According to the Department of Health (DoH), cancer is the second leading cause of death, globally. It is a non-communicable disease which is caused by abnormal cells dividing uncontrollably and, in so doing, destroying body tissue and resulting in tumours. "Cancerous tumours spread into, or invade, nearby tissues and can travel to distant places in the body to form new tumours (a process called metastasis). Many cancers form solid tumours, but cancers of the blood, such as leukaemia, generally do not."¹

World Cancer Day was commemorated on 4th February 2023. The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Director for Africa, Dr Matshidiso Moeti, said that "this year's campaign focuses on the need to be united as we build stronger alliances and new innovative collaborations in the fight against cancer".² This focus hopes "to raise awareness, improve education and increase access to life-saving cancer treatment for all citizens".³ The incidence of cancer is considerable amongst both adults and children. Approximately 1.1 million new cancer cases occur each year in Africa, with about 700 000 deaths. Data estimates show a considerable increase in cancer mortality to nearly one million deaths per year by 2030, without urgent and bold interventions.⁴

The most common cancers in adults include breast (16.5%), cervical (13.1%), prostate (9.4%), colorectal (6%), and liver (4.6%) cancers, which constitute nearly half of all new cancer cases. Regular screening, as well as early diagnosis and treatment, can do much to mitigate the impact of the disease. 16 African countries have introduced high-performance screening tests in line with WHO recommendations and plan to scale up particularly cervical cancer screening.

Cancer is a leading cause of death for children and adolescents.⁵ Cancers in children tend to be different from those found in adults, with most of them occurring in the developing cells such as bone marrow, blood, kidneys and nervous system tissues.⁶ With significant data challenges, childhood cancer incidence in sub-Saharan Africa is estimated at 56.3 per million of the population. Current projections show that Africa will account for nearly 50% of the global childhood cancer burden by 2050.

Three collaborating centres established in Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, and South Africa aim to improve cancer registration in sub-Saharan Africa. The centres will facilitate capacity building for local staff and improve data quality for effective decision-making. Accurate and timely cancer data is essential for countries to better understand and respond effectively to the needs of their populations.

Risk factors which may contribute to the development of cancers include: smoking; alcohol; obesity; ultraviolet rays from the sun; inactivity; infection; radiation; occupation; post-menopausal factors; and genetics. According to the DoH, over one-third of cancers are preventable, which means cancer risk can be reduced. The Department has urged South Africans to go for regular cancer screenings to help with early detection, risk reduction, and successful treatment.⁷

A possible new cancer treatment has recently come to the fore, in the form of cannabidiol (CBD), derived from the hemp plant. The potential for CBD in the context of cancer is twofold: "firstly, there is evidence that it can directly kill cancer cells, enhancing the ability of traditional therapies to treat the disease.

This is not to say that CBD will replace those traditional therapies; the data is not that compelling. Secondly, because of its ability to reduce pain and perhaps anxiety, the addition of CBD to a treatment plan may reduce side effects and increase the quality of life for people with cancer”⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns imposed to prevent its spread interrupted the diagnosis and treatment of cancer patients and severely limited access to oncology services. Load shedding has compounded the paucity of services, with almost daily reports of the health care challenges facing hospitals across the country.

The Deputy Minister of Health, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, highlighted in his speech on the occasion of World Cancer Day that “the burden of cancer continues to grow globally, exerting physical, emotional and financial strain on individuals, families, communities and health systems”⁹

The links below provide further information regarding the disease.

<https://www.afro.who.int/regional-director/speeches-messages/world-cancer-day-2023>

<https://allafrica.com/stories/202302030473.html>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-02-08-eastern-cape-hospital-generator-broken-for-weeks-but-provincial-health-dept-says-it-doesnt-affect-patients/>

<https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/understanding/what-is-cancer>

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cancer-in-children>

<https://cansa.org.za/types-of-childhood-cancer/>

Lois Law

Project Co-ordinator

lois@cplo.org.za

¹ <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/understanding/what-is-cancer>

² <https://www.afro.who.int/regional-director/speeches-messages/world-cancer-day-2023>

³ <https://www.afro.who.int/regional-director/speeches-messages/world-cancer-day-2023>

⁴ <https://www.afro.who.int/regional-director/speeches-messages/world-cancer-day-2023>

⁵ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cancer-in-children>

⁶ <https://cansa.org.za/types-of-childhood-cancer/>

⁷ <https://allafrica.com/stories/202302030473.html>

⁸ https://theconversation.com/cbd-is-not-a-cure-all-heres-what-science-says-about-its-real-health-benefits-186901?utm_me

⁹ <https://www.iol.co.za/dailynews/news/south-africans-urged-to-go-for-regular-cancer-screening-and-testing-for-early-detection-e12ae7d0-2286-4c45-85a5-a00d7e3384a7>