

CANCER



How to take care of patients

By Jacky Achan

To assess clinical and psychological needs of patients with advanced breast cancer in Uganda, a study was conducted between June 2016 and February 2017. The lead researcher was Dr Henry Ddungu, a consultant, haematologist/oncologist at the Uganda Cancer Institute in Mulago, Kampala.

The findings showed that the needs of most of the cancer patients centred on advice about the following:

- Relieving pain.
- Management of wounds while at home
- The kind of food to eat to remain healthy.
- How to cope with feeling unwell most of the time.
- Available financial assistance.
- Help when there is lack of energy or tiredness of the patient
- Help where there is inability to do the things the patient wants to
- Help with work around home.

Meeting needs of patients

Dr Ddungu gave tips on how to have these needs met. He says it pain includes both physical and non-physical pain, which includes

worrying about what will happen next.

"A patient may be given opioids where they experience a lot of pain. This is medicine with opium, so we teach people how to use it at home. This medicine, among others, includes oral morphine to reduce pain," Ddungu says.

The other way of relieving patients of pain is through counselling and social support at home, although these services are still inadequate in Uganda.

"So we work with spiritual leaders, who visit patients at home to boost their faith and give them hope. However, we face challenges of some religious leaders who tell patients to stop taking drugs and look at faith," Ddungu says.

Managing wounds

According to Ddungu, wounds among cancer patients are a big inconvenience because of the discharge and bad smell. "When they worsen, they are treated with radiotherapy, but at home we advise patients to crush Flagyl tablets and apply the powder on the wound. It

Financial assistance

Ddungu says cancer treatment is very expensive. You find that by the time one goes for actual cancer treatment, one has moved in so many health facilities to figure out the problem and forked out huge sums of money.

This is a cause for emotional distress, so one has to rely on their family for financial support. If the patient is employed, we can always write to their social security managers to release their money, even if they haven't made the age to receive this money so that they can afford treatment.

controls the smell and keeps the wound dry," he explains.

Nutrition and exercise

Alfred Jatho, a cancer health educator, who works at the Uganda Cancer Institute in Mulago, says when it comes to nutrition, focus should be on quantity, variety and

quality.

Not only should the patient eat and get satisfied, but also ensure they get a balanced diet.

"You will need the body building foods with proteins, energy foods with carbohydrates and protective foods like fruits. Everything should be eaten in moderation. Do not say you will not eat food with fats because sometimes the body needs it," Jatho says, adding that the food must be prepared in a clean place.

According to Ddungu, a cancer patient cannot afford to be selective on what food to eat.

"If they do not eat well, we cannot give them treatment," he says.

"Unhygienic foods may form harmful chemicals for the body and some may even lead to more cancer. Also, do not fry and burn your food because this leads to formation of harmful chemicals, which may worsen the cancer," he says.

Exercise

He says although it is important that you exercise and do some chores to ensure good blood circulation, it should be on the advice of a doctor. "So talk to your doctor and get advice on what you can do at

whatever stage of treatment you are on. "Sometimes you may be too weak to do some things such as walking. So exercises and chores may have to be mild and not vigorous. When doing house chores, you may also need to be guided by your doctor," he says.

Getting help when weak

According to Ddungu, fatigue is a commonest challenge for cancer patients.

"We encourage a cancer patient to be active to manage fatigue — not just lie on their bed or keep in a place. We are not saying you go to the gym, because that is unrealistic. Move around and not just keep in bed," he says.

How to cope

Ddungu says if the patient is feeling unwell all the time the doctor will find out why and deals with it.

To feel better, some cancer patients have groups in which they may share their stories on how they live with life. These shared experiences make patients feel better and lonely — like they are not the ones going through a difficult situation.