



Dr Catherine Nagadya

Are we ready to fight against cancer?

I once organised a Christmas party for children in the Oncology room at St. Mary's Hospital Lacor in Gulu. With contributions from staff, we had music, a day out in the compound playing, balloons, cake, and presents to share.

I prefer to believe that the love and hope we shared caused the families to celebrate life instead of mourning its brevity!

Cancer has been around much longer than HIV/AIDS; with earlier descriptions of it dating back to 1600BC and cases documented in the Kampala Cancer Registry as early as 1954! Data from this same registry is showing an increase in the incidence of all forms of cancer among all age brackets and evidently it is the latest popular phenomenon that all Ugandans are bonding over since all of us have or are being affected!

Cancer is not a notifiable disease in Uganda and the data captured in the Kampala Cancer Registry is obtained by voluntary submission!

We need to scale up and disseminate knowledge on the importance of modifying lifestyle related risk factors

The Ministry of Health Management Information System (HMIS) monthly report (form 105) doesn't capture cancer diagnoses made in outpatient departments and this means that, as a country, we miss very important data.

Without proper data collection, we cannot inform health programme planning, policy-making, action, funding and research priorities.

For this reason, we find diagnosis of cancer a matter of chance because our health facilities are poorly equipped, under-staffed and the numbers of relevant specialists like pathologists in Uganda could be counted on your fingers.

With the popular practice of self-medicating in a mix of poverty and different cultures and religious beliefs that attribute illness to witchcraft, patients most frequently than not do present very late when palliation is the only option.

One of the parents in the ward said that being a parent to a child with cancer was worse than having cancer, wishing he could give his life for the child!

It is thus noble that the public has embraced drives to get treatment facilities and equipment, but rigorous effort is needed to raise awareness about cancer, screening (beyond cancer of the cervix and breast) for early detection and timely referral for treatment so we improve outcomes.

We need to scale up and disseminate knowledge on the importance of modifying lifestyle-related risk factors like drinking lots of water (at least eight cups daily), eating diets rich in greens, whole grains and nuts, exercising (a two-hour daily walk can do) and being of ideal weight, cutting down on alcohol consumption and ceasing to smoke cigarettes.

We also need to tone down the time we spend talking on our cell phones or at least use devices like headphones.

Close attention should be paid to symptoms like severe frequent pain, rapid weight loss, constant fevers, excessive sweating at night and swellings or whenever we do not feel right, let us see a doctor - it is the reason we exist!

The MoH should, however, improve on our HMIS reports so that we can generate data - it is the reason you exist! I look forward to cancer messages on "Obulamu?"

The writer is the chief executive officer and co-founder of Girls Unstoppable Uganda