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COMMENT

No time to waste in the battle against time

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IN SOUTH Africa, the number of new cancer cases increased by more than 50% between 2008 and 2018, while the number of cancer-related deaths increased by nearly 30% over the same period.

A common problem when treating cancer in South Africa is that a high percentage of new cases, almost 50% for some types of cancer, are diagnosed when the disease is already advanced.

Therefore, it is crucial that these patients receive timely care, since delay in diagnosis and treatment increase their chances of having a complication or make the treatments less effective at curing the disease.

This year should also be high on the agenda on World Cancer Day on February 4, given that the 2025-27 campaign, Unite by Unique, highlights the importance of bringing people at the centre of care and searching for new ways to improve cancer treatment.

In high-income countries, a benchmark of receiving cancer treatment within two months of disease diagnosis is set. However, in South Africa, most patients will not achieve this benchmark partly because of limited access to care and support mechanisms during cancer treatment, and poor awareness around the importance of receiving timely treatment.

Cancer treatment centres are usually located in urban areas for several reasons – easy integration of these services into existing healthcare infrastructure, access to multidisciplinary teams of healthcare professionals, a stable electricity supply for imaging theatres and radiation treatment equipment. Also, most cancer specialists prefer to live close to large cities.

Patients who live in remote rural areas would need to budget for transport costs. Patients also require additional support during their cancer treatment journey, particularly with their care at home, and those who do not have friends or family to support them often struggle to follow their recommended care plans.

Awareness of the consequences when cancer treatment is not received is a crucial cue to action in patients who are considering whether to accept a cancer treatment or not. Although our government has done a lot to combat disease deaths from infections such as HIV and tuberculosis by improving knowledge and raising awareness of these diseases through public education, there are still many more that needs to be done to tackle the growing problem posed by cancer.

So how can we address these challenges in South Africa? Outreach activities, whereby cancer centres provide certain services at other healthcare facilities outside the major cities, could be a feasible alternative services for patients and reduce the time and money required to travel to receive care.

Facilitating subsidised or free transport from patients' homes to cancer treatment centres can also help to reduce the financial burden on cancer patients and empower them to receive their treatment.

Patients should also be encouraged to involve a close family member or family member for support during their cancer journey and when this is not an option, this supportive role could be delegated to motivated cancer survivors who seek to help others with their cancer.

Lastly, to improve general cancer awareness and the consequences of delayed cancer treatment, policymakers would need to work closely with cancer specialists and patient advocacy groups to develop public health campaigns and informational brochures that can be easily understood by cancer patients and the public.

Some people may ask: Won't this cost the public sector more with African health system ever more money? Our response would be that while there will be some costs incurred by the public healthcare system when the aforementioned approach is first adopted, over time there will gradually be fewer patients receiving care late, fewer patients receiving delayed care, and more successful treatments for cancer patients – all of which will lead to long-term cost savings.

By improving access to cancer treatment, strengthening support mechanisms for patients, and raising awareness on cancer and delayed care, there is a real opportunity to change the current status quo for patients. Cancer does not wait, and neither should patients diagnosed with this disease.

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