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IAEA review prompts regional cooperation to address cancer workforce challenges in Iraq



Viewing diagnostic images at the Al-Amal National Oncology Hospital. (Photo: M. Alabbودي/Al-Amal National Oncology Hospital, Iraq)

“Strengthened cancer management is one of the highest healthcare priorities in the country.”

— Saleh Mehdi Mutalib, Minister of Health, Iraq

A group of cancer care professionals from across Iraq and the wider region are working in tandem to support more effective and efficient cancer management in the country, following recommendations from an IAEA-led [imPACT Review](#) in November 2021.

The review team — a group of regional and international experts brought together by the IAEA, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in response to a request from Iraq’s

Ministry of Health — highlighted the importance of workforce training, especially in medical physics, radiation safety, radiation oncology and radiology, along with addressing the challenge of retaining qualified personnel for cancer care.

Immediate IAEA response

Following the review, officials from the Iraqi Ministry of Health were invited to observe cancer services at Jordan’s King Hussein Cancer Center (KHCC) in December, and, separately, a group of Iraqi medical professionals learned about practices in Türkiye’s radiotherapy facilities, as well as Türkiye’s resource management approaches, outreach to charity organizations and innovative service delivery models. These scientific visits were financed through the IAEA technical cooperation programme.

“The imPACT Review fostered the creation of a network of doctors and regional experts from Iraq, Jordan and Türkiye,” said Massoud Malek, the IAEA Programme Management Officer for Iraq. “And Jordan, for example, has hospital



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departments which share many similarities to those in Iraq, so experiences and practices are well suited for adaptation.”

Increasing the accessibility and affordability of cancer care is a key consideration for Iraq’s government and is in the focus of the government’s efforts.

“Iraqi medical specialists are eager to listen to regional and international experts, to get an independent assessment of gaps and to develop an action plan that will ultimately help the Iraqi people,” said Musab Alabboodi, Director of the Al-Amal National Oncology Hospital in Baghdad.

The imPACT Review strengthened cross-border professional networks and has opened up longer term regional mentoring and collaboration opportunities. The Iraqi and Jordanian authorities are developing a cooperation framework agreement covering a broad range of radiation medicine activities. This approach is in line with

the IAEA’s strategic commitment to expanding South-South cooperation in the field of peaceful nuclear technology as part of its contribution to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, Malek said.

Iraq’s prevailing cancers — breast, lung, colorectum, leukaemia and non-Hodgkin lymphoma — account for nearly half of all cancers diagnosed in the country every year. The imPACT Review team collected data from a broad range of counterparts, including more than 15 cancer diagnosis and treatment facilities located throughout the country. Given the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, together with the challenge of reaching certain areas of the country, the imPACT Review was conducted virtually.

In order to ensure safe, secure and effective use of radiation sources in Iraq for cancer treatment, the expert team also recommended the adoption of a nuclear law as an immediate step.

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Iraq makes progress in improving cancer services, implements imPACT Review recommendation



imPACT Review radiation oncology expert Dr Yavuz Anacak discussing cancer care infrastructure in Mosul with the Ministry of Health cancer focal point Dr Musaib Khadim Alabboodi and WHO staff responsible for the Nineveh Governorate. (Photo: A. Juric/IAEA)

Iraq has made progress in implementing recommendations from a 2021 IAEA-IARC-WHO imPACT Review aimed at improving comprehensive cancer control in the country, according to the findings of a follow-up review

conducted in the country last month. Progress has included improving coordination between the Iraqi Cancer Board and the Ministry of Health Noncommunicable Disease Unit, and the adoption of a Ministerial decree to facilitate opioid

prescription for terminally ill patients. The country also confirmed its intention to develop a national cancer control strategy and plan.

Health authorities in Iraq have been working to implement the 2021 recommendations by the IAEA, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) experts. The review was carried out on request of the government to assess the country's progress, particularly in the areas of cancer diagnosis and treatment and childhood cancers. The review findings will be used to further guide the Ministry of Health toward setting further priorities related to cancer.

“Strengthened cancer management is one of the highest healthcare priorities in the country,” said Saleh Mehdi Mutalib, Iraq's Minister of Health. “Iraq needs to develop a holistic, realistic and practical approach, in accordance with established guidelines and subject to availability of essential medicines and technology. It requires a multi-disciplinary approach, and inclusion of psycho-social support for patients and families.”

Some of the most urgent challenges facing the country in cancer care — found in the 2021 imPACT Review and the 2023 follow-up country mission — include non-operational equipment and a lack of cancer treatment guidelines, together with workforce shortages and limited education and training.

“Iraq needs to put in place a five-year cancer plan,” said Dr Musaib Khadim Alabboodi, the cancer care/management focal point at the Ministry of Health. “This should cover all areas of cancer control, from prevention to palliative care, and should identify priority training needs.”

Following on from the initial review recommendations, the Ministry of Health nominated five candidates for IAEA technical cooperation fellowships, each of whom completed a one-month hands-on multidisciplinary fellowship training course in radiation oncology and medical physics in advanced radiation therapy. The candidates also received hands-on clinical experience at cancer care centres in Türkiye and Jordan, with the help and guidance of international experts. Two-week scientific visits were organized to Izmir, Türkiye, affording the opportunity for Iraqi experts to see first-hand the resource allocation, management and mobilization approaches, private sector outreach and care delivery models used by their peers at the Ege University Hospital's Department of Radiation Oncology in Türkiye.

Several further three month-long fellowships are currently underway at KHCC to build capacity in medical physics, radiation safety and radiation oncology. Upon the completion of their fellowships, the experts are expected to return to their home institutions in Iraq, bringing with them the ability to implement new techniques, apply advanced standards and clinical procedures, and share their enhanced skills with local radiotherapy professionals.

“Developing the Iraq cancer strategy in alignment with national SDG goals is crucial. The results of this follow-up imPACT Review will contribute to defining the success metrics for cancer management in Iraq,” said Dr Ahmed Zouiten, WHO Country Representative for Iraq.

The follow-up imPACT Review mission team visited over 15 hospitals, clinics and other facilities, and met key policy makers, clinicians and support staff in Baghdad, Erbil and Mosul.

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