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Cancer Care in Tanzania Advances to Next Stage



*A hospital ward at the Ocean Road Cancer Institute, Tanzania's only hospital dedicated to cancer treatment.
(Photo: American Cancer Society)*

“The message is out that Tanzania is taking a lead in the fight against cancer and the Ministry is looking at ways to help move the process forward, fast.”

— Dr. Deo Mtasiwa, Chief Medical Officer,
Ministry of Health and Social Welfare

Tanzania, one of the world's ten poorest nations, is facing a cancer crisis with as many as 35,000 new cases expected a year. Last week, an interagency mission to Dar es Salaam applauded steps taken towards building a National Cancer Control Plan and pledged continued support in tackling the growing cancer burden.

The team from PACT and its international partners* visited the East African country 28-31 May, 2007 to review current cancer control efforts and build on

recommendations made in May 2006. The visit was coordinated by the Ocean Road Cancer Institute (ORCI), the country's only cancer hospital with radiation therapy capabilities.

Welcoming the mission, ORCI Executive Director Dr. Twalib Ngoma said: “We are making progress but we rely on PACT and our international partners to support and guide us in where we go from here and how we will get there.”

ORCI is already struggling to cope with an influx of 3,000 new patients and up to 10,000 follow-up visits a year - figures which will increase dramatically as early detection techniques improve. Radiotherapy is a valuable tool for both the curative and palliative treatment of cancer. Through the IAEA, an Equinox Cobalt-60 radiotherapy machine was installed in July 2006 and a second one, donated by PACT, will become operational later this year. For over two decades, the IAEA's technical cooperation programme has provided Tanzania with equipment, expertise and training in the field of cancer treatment.



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But the need to raise awareness and develop cancer control at the national level is crucial. The interagency partners welcomed the government's appointment of a Steering Committee drawn from both medical and civil society. With the authority of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and expert guidance from ORCI, it is hoped the Steering Committee will expedite efforts to build and strengthen Tanzania's National Cancer Control Plan.

Underlining the importance of Tanzanian leadership of the plan, PACT mission leader Daniel Malin said: "International partners can advise and provide stimulation for a National Cancer Control Plan, but Tanzanian ownership is foremost. In this it is imperative that the government plays a role."

During the four-day series of meetings and workshops, PACT and its partners exchanged views with those on the frontline of executing the plan—ORCI medical staff and representatives of the Tanzanian government. It was agreed the elements should include increased screening for common cancers; earlier detection of cancers and the delivery of curative treatment; improved public awareness of early cancer detection and its prevention; enhanced palliative care; and the expansion of radiotherapy centres.

The urgent need to reach Tanzania's far-flung rural communities by implementing cancer control measures at a regional level was emphasized by all stakeholders. In this the IAEA is active in expanding nuclear medicine and radiotherapy capabilities in Bugando Hospital in Mwanza, northern Tanzania.

Promising government support, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Deo Mtasiwa, said: "The message is out that Tanzania is taking a lead in the fight against cancer and the Ministry is looking at ways to help move the process forward, fast." These include training staff and establishing screening initiatives in regional hospitals, especially for breast, cervical and prostate cancers. Dr. Mtasiwa added that the budget for this was already in place.

In early May leading cancer experts and policymakers met in London, UK, to voice support for an action plan aimed at tackling Africa's growing cancer crisis. The action plan builds on the Cape Town Declaration of December 2006: a document designed to bolster awareness and commitments to meet growing cancer needs in Africa.

* PACT's partners in the mission to Tanzania included:

- American Cancer Society
- International Agency for Research on Cancer
- International Network for Cancer Treatment and Research
- Union for International Cancer Control
- World Health Organization Regional Office for Africa

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