

Stronger together: The IAEA and UN partners work with Albania to fight cancer

The challenge...

Cancer is the second cause of death in Albania and the number of new cancer cases is steadily increasing, with around 5500 cases each year, of which 25 to 30% are diagnosed in children and young people. Diagnostic services and radiation treatment at the Mother Teresa University Hospital Center (MTUHC) in Tirana, the only public multidisciplinary centre for cancer care in the country, were insufficient to address the needs of Albanian cancer patients. Overcoming this problem is among the key issues identified in Albania's *National Cancer Control Programme 2011–2020*.

The project...

Nuclear techniques are critical for the early detection, diagnosis, treatment and care of cancer. Often, these techniques are the sole means of diagnosis, and they also are one of the most efficient methods for cancer treatment.

Within the framework of the *Government of Albania – UN Programme of Cooperation 2012–2016*, the IAEA coordinated efforts with key partners such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to enhance the quality and safety of comprehensive cancer care services at MTUHC. An IAEA technical cooperation (TC) project facilitated the procurement and upgrading of specialized equipment, and some twenty professionals, ranging from physicians to medical physicists, benefited from on-the-job training in radiation therapy, diagnostic imaging and radiation protection. The continuous involvement of high level representatives from the Ministry of Health, together with dialogue with sister UN organizations, was instrumental in the successful implementation of the project.

The impact...

The TC project led to a significant improvement of diagnostic and therapeutic services at MTUHC in terms of both patient throughput and quality, and facilitated cooperation between radiotherapy and nuclear medicine professionals and various medical specialists. The hospital's radiation protection infrastructure is now consistent with IAEA Safety Standards, which is essential for the safe treatment of patients.

During 2012 and 2013, the MTUHC Nuclear Medicine Department performed 6406 examinations. This is a substantial figure, considering that nuclear medicine services in Albania only restarted in 2011. During the same period, 96 patients were cured of thyroid cancer with high dose Iodine-131. In the Oncology Clinic, the number of cancer patients treated with radiotherapy (26% of which were affected by breast cancer) increased by 20%: a total of 1123 in 2012 and 1350 in 2013.



Members of the nuclear medicine team at the MTUHC.