

Partners Saving

Ana María Cetto, IAEA's Deputy Director General, Technical Cooperation, tells Sasha Henriques how the IAEA helps countries develop the necessary tools to fight cancer.



(Photos: G.Verlini/IAEA)

Cancer affects people at an age when they still have the capacity to contribute their experience, productivity and knowledge to society and their families. So, anything that improves or extends the lives of people with cancer is very important. — Ana María Cetto

How does cancer impede development?

Any major public health issue is also a development issue in that it impedes national socio-economic development. In the recent past, communicable diseases used to be the main public health issue in developing countries.

However, the incidence of non-communicable diseases like heart disease, cancer and diabetes is increasing, impacting millions around the world. This is true for cancer in particular because the incidence of cancer is growing quickly in developing countries. Looking at the statistics you can see that the largest fraction of new cases is emerging in developing countries, where already 70% of all cancer cases occur.

Cancer affects people at an age when they still have the capacity to contribute their experience, productivity and knowledge to society and their fam-

ilies. So anything that improves or extends the lives of people with cancer is very important.

Why does cancer need to be part of the global health agenda?

Cancer is a national problem first and a global problem second. Developing countries are not prepared to cope with this increasing burden. To manage, they need to establish national policies, have enough well-trained health professionals, produce or have affordable access to the relevant drugs, and have infrastructure — hospitals, equipment etc.

Cancer is a global issue and should be on the international health agenda because it affects millions in every country around the world, and tackling the problem requires copious amounts of money. Therefore it's necessary to have better coordination

between all the national and international stakeholders — the World Health Organisation, specialised agencies like the IAEA, non-governmental organisations, health ministries, and the private sector. Each one of these have their own interests, perceptions and agendas; together we need to find a unified way to address this issue.

How can the international community fight cancer more effectively?

The most effective way to fight cancer is through partnerships. They are crucial because there are so many specialised players out there. Each one of us has to understand the issue at hand and what can be done to contribute in relation to the other partners.

That is why partnership building has become so important. It means not only partnering for the sake of it, but

Lives


understanding what can the others do that we do not do, and what can we do that the others cannot.

The IAEA is well positioned to fight cancer because of its expertise in nuclear technology and the obvious lack of sufficient radiotherapy facilities and services in developing countries. The main source of technical cooperation in the world in the field of radiotherapy and nuclear medicine is the IAEA, whereas the WHO provides support in other critical areas of cancer control and prevention.

How does the IAEA help developing countries fight cancer?

We have been helping 115 developing Member States for over 30 years to strengthen their capacity to undertake both diagnosis and treatment using radiotherapy, and in recent years, nuclear medicine.

We support Member States mainly by providing equipment and expertise, knowledge sharing, and training, through the Technical Cooperation programme. This has enabled many of them to establish safe and effective diagnosis and radiation therapy capacity. But the existing infrastructure is far from adequate. Furthermore, there are

new and more powerful techniques and treatments which every country deserves to acquire and put in place. A more integrated approach is needed, and this is what the IAEA promotes through the Programme of Action for Cancer Therapy (PACT). 

Sasha Henriques is a staff writer in the Division of Public Information. E-mail: S.Henriques@iaea.org

Access for Everyone

Juan Antonio Casas-Zamora, Director, Latin America Division, IAEA Department of Technical Cooperation discusses the human rights aspect of cancer care.

Are there disparities in cancer survival rates between countries, social classes and ethnicities?

Yes. This is a human rights issue which needs to be addressed. In practically every country those who have the economic resources are definitely going to get treatment, either in their own country or they have their own resources to travel abroad to get treatment. And those who don't have the money will not get treated.

I think that if one person has access, all people should have access to at least a basic level of treatment. That's why cancer should be part of the global health agenda, because there are many inequities in the access to cancer treatment.

So what is the IAEA doing to address these inequities in treatment and outcomes?

The Programme of Action for Cancer Therapy (PACT) has been doing a good job of raising awareness about the issue and working in partnership with local, regional and international organisations.

We normally concentrate on one major health institution in each country because the problem is too big for us to solve, plus it's not for us to solve, it's for the countries to solve. But we help the country to establish one facility that is fully functioning (which includes having well trained professionals) so that they develop the necessary capacity which can be spread to other health care institutions around the country.



Also, cancer is a field where new drugs, technology and equipment are constantly being developed, and the IAEA helps transfer this new knowledge to its Member States. 