

Mongolia and IAEA: successful cooperation, renewed focus on cancer care

Replacements for existing radiotherapy treatment units and the forthcoming installation of two new linear accelerators will greatly boost Mongolia's national cancer programme and reduce waiting times for patients, the country's officials have said. The last few years have seen an increase in cancer cases in Mongolia, and "being a developing country, we need all the support that the IAEA can provide us," said Minjmaa Minjee, a radiation oncologist with the National Cancer Centre in the capital Ulan Bator.

Effective treatment through quick diagnosis

IAEA support has been crucial for Mongolia in the acquisition of a gamma beam radiation protection system and an X-ray calibration system to support the country's cancer control, diagnosis and treatment programme. The IAEA is also assisting Mongolia in upgrading a computed tomography and single photon emission computed tomography medical imaging system at the First General Hospital in Ulan Bator. In addition, there are plans to install two linear accelerators in a new hospital extension building that will be inaugurated later this year. The possibility of installing advanced 3D brachytherapy facilities for patients in 2016 is also under consideration.

The presence of such state-of-the-art technology in Ulan Bator will enable Mongolia to treat more cancer patients, and will help to reduce the long waiting times.

"Time is of the essence where cancer is concerned; quick diagnosis and effective treatment in a timely manner can help patients, and these radiotherapy machines are what we need to meet this goal of ours," Minjee said. In addition, the IAEA's resource mobilization assistance to Mongolia resulted in significant funding provided by Japan and Monaco for upgrading the radiotherapy treatment planning system's hardware

and software at the National Cancer Centre.

Progress achieved

Mongolia is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world, making the provision of universal cancer care particularly challenging. A population of just under 3 million is spread over an area of more than 1.5 million square kilometres — larger than France, Germany and the United Kingdom combined.

"Our objective is to provide access to cancer diagnosis and treatment to people from the countryside so lives can be saved," Minjee said. "We highly value international cooperation and support, including with the IAEA, to help us improve the quality of medical care and services in cancer treatment, which today is an urgent health problem." Cancer is responsible for 22 per cent of deaths in the country, second only to cardiovascular diseases.

Since 1995, the IAEA has been helping Mongolia to enhance its national cancer programme, by providing policy advice, equipment and technical training. Three major technical cooperation projects have been successfully implemented: improving radiotherapy services; upgrading quality assurance; and developing new technologies and radiation safety systems for radiotherapy services.

Mongolia has also received assistance through the IAEA Programme of Action for Cancer Therapy related to paediatric cancer care, palliative care and training in radiation medicine. Following policy assistance in 2010 the country's General Action Plan on Cancer Prevention and Control for 2011–2021 was developed and endorsed.

Planning for the future

Since it joined the IAEA in 1973, Mongolia has received assistance in



Minjmaa Minjee, radiation oncologist, National Cancer Center, Ulan Bator, Mongolia.

(Photo: S. Henriques/IAEA)

using nuclear applications to improve the lives of its people in various sectors, including diagnosis and treatment of animal diseases. The livestock sector is one of the most important for the majority of the population in Mongolia, and the IAEA helps to improve the productivity of cattle, camels and yaks through better nutrition and reproductive management.

"The concrete steps taken through IAEA projects to support Mongolia in a number of areas using the peaceful applications of nuclear techniques has helped our country and our people," said Tamir Nyambayar, the country's former National Liaison Assistant to the IAEA.

Last March Mongolia finalized its Country Programme Framework for 2016–2021, integrating the application of nuclear technology into its development plans. The Framework defines priority development needs and interests that can be supported through the IAEA's technical cooperation activities. The emphasis for the coming period is on human health, Nyambayar said.

— *By Aabha Dixit*