

Cancer is a battle that can only be won if everyone works together

By Kim Simplis Barrow, First Lady of Belize



As a cancer survivor and Belize's Special Envoy for Women and Children, one of my main goals is to reduce the burden of cancer and give hope to those negatively affected by this disease in its many manifestations.

Even though my country is a small nation with limited resources, I firmly know that, collectively, we can do more to ensure that persons everywhere have access to effective, affordable and comprehensive cancer prevention and treatment services. My knowledge comes from successful initiatives taken in my role as Special Envoy for Women and Children: the construction of the Inspiration Center, which provides facilities for children with disabilities, and a state-of-the-art paediatric and neonatal intensive care unit at Belize's national referral hospital — the Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital.

Reflecting on my own experience, I am acutely aware of the importance of early detection of cancer, access to information and proper treatment services. I am also fully committed to the level of engagement necessary to ensure that cancer control initiatives are integrated into Belize's health and development agendas.

According to the Pan American Health Organization, cancer is the leading cause of death in our region and, based on our current path, the projection is that the number of cancer deaths will almost double by 2030.

Belize has a population of a little over 370 000, with over half our citizens living in poverty. Statistics from the Ministry of Health reveal that cancer continues to be the third-highest cause of death in the country. Belize, with other low and middle income countries, has come to understand the magnitude of the cancer problem and the devastating effects it has on a country's economy and overall development.

As a breast cancer survivor, I was among the minority of persons in my country who were able to travel abroad for oncology care. I was blessed to have access to excellent medical

care and support throughout my journey. Too many people in Latin America and the Caribbean experience late diagnosis and treatment, which can be attributed to lack of oncology personnel and critical oncology treatment in our countries. With high poverty levels in many families, cancer care is quite often inaccessible or made possible only through community intervention. These factors impact the lives of families affected by cancer and often result in low survival rates.

Chemotherapy services have recently become available to our citizens through the generosity of a Belizean oncologist and his dedicated team; however, management of complications of cancer treatment and of the physiological and psychosocial issues affecting a patient's survival is less than optimal within the wider health system. These issues must be addressed if we are to provide equitable, accessible, affordable and quality health-care services.

I am also spearheading the establishment of a cancer centre to provide comprehensive oncology services and, ultimately, remove the need for and expense of travelling abroad for cancer services. Given my experience in establishing centres of excellence, I am seeking to collaborate with organizations like the IAEA and donor agencies in the training of oncology physicians, nurses and other personnel needed for a comprehensive cancer care programme.

We recognize the importance of partnerships, and we are grateful for the IAEA's expert mission to Belize in December 2016, during which a thorough assessment of our country's cancer care response was conducted. Preparations are under way for a second assessment by the IAEA, to determine the best geographical site for the establishment of a cancer centre for the people of Belize. Fighting cancer is a battle that can only be won if everyone works together. Support from the IAEA, the World Health Organization and other global agencies is critical to controlling cancer in developing countries like Belize.