

EDITORIAL**BREAST CANCER IS CURABLE**

World Cancer Day is marked on February 4 each year to raise awareness of all cancers and to encourage prevention, detection, and treatment. However, the cancer that receives most attention every year (and perhaps rightly so) is Breast Cancer, observed throughout October as Breast Cancer awareness month. Every year, there are a lot of activities to create awareness and educate the public about the disease. After all, it is the leading cancer in the country and the leading cause of all cancer deaths in Ghana. Moreover, Breast Cancer evokes a lot of emotion for men and women alike since it is often associated with loss of the breast, a symbol of femininity, beauty and womanhood.

Late presentation of breast and other cancers remains one of the biggest problems with cancer management in Ghana and other lower and middle income countries (LMICs). It is associated with more advanced stage disease, more expensive treatment, more extensive treatment (e.g. mastectomy rather than breast conservation) and poorer prognosis. Late stage disease patients also often suffer from advanced local disease that is difficult to treat and is associated with misery from offensive discharge, ulceration, bleeding and pain. They may need other interventions to deal with complications and metastatic disease. With breast cancer, patients might need draining of pleural effusions and prolonged chemotherapy with its associated side effects.

Results from a recent study from the Radiotherapy Department in the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital, however, show that 5-year survival from Stage 0 and 1 Breast Cancers was as high as 92%, while Stage 4 cancers were as low as 15%. The 5-year survival also decreased with increasing tumour size and increasing number of axillary lymph nodal involvement, both related to late presentation.

The high 5-year survival rate in patients with early stage breast cancer shows that we have the ability to 'cure' most of the patients with breast cancer provided they report early to hospital. This is a message that needs to be emphasized – that early presentation will save lives, that breast cancer can be cured. The improvements that have occurred globally in cancer survival have basically been as a result of early detection (especially through screening) and advances in treatment options and capabilities (e.g. targeted treatment). Effective treatment of cancer also involves multidisciplinary teams working synergistically to offer comprehensive treatment.

Ghana is making slow but significant strides in the fight against cancer. Subspecialty development and multidisciplinary team management of cancer needs to be continued and intensified. Policy makers also need to pay greater attention to non-communicable diseases and to cancer in particular. This is important since the WHO predicts an increase in breast cancer incidence in LMICs.

Treatment of cancer is not at all cheap. Even breast and cervical cancer patients, whose treatment is supposed to be covered by the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS), often have to pay a lot out of pocket. Indeed, finance has been cited by many authors as one of the reasons for patients' failure to undergo treatment. Innovative ways of healthcare financing therefore need to be adopted, even by NHIS.

With intensive and effective education, screening, multidisciplinary team work and effective treatment, the fight against cancer can be won in developing countries like Ghana. Cancer is no longer a death sentence; it is curable.

*Prof Joe-Nat A Clegg-Lamptey,
Department of Surgery, School of Medicine
and Dentistry, University of Ghana*