

Awareness key to cancer prevention and early diagnosis

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Cancer is a leading cause of sickness and death in the Philippines, imposing a heavy socio-economic burden on patients and their families. From January to June 2024, cancer was among the top three causes of death in the country, accounting for 11% of the total deaths nationwide. Cancer of the breast, lung, colon and rectum, and cervix claim the greatest number of Filipino lives.



February is National Cancer Awareness Month. Led by the Department of Health (DoH) in collaboration with local government units, cancer-focused professional societies, and academic institutions, the annual observance aims to raise awareness about cancer and its prevention as well as the importance of early detection in improving outcomes by providing care at the earliest possible stage.

Prevention offers the most cost-effective long-term strategy for the control of cancer. Between 30% and 50% of cancer deaths could be prevented by modifying or avoiding key risk factors and implementing existing evidence-based prevention strategies, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). These include avoiding tobacco use, including cigarettes and smokeless tobacco; maintaining a healthy weight; eating a healthy diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables; and exercising regularly.

Also in the list are limiting alcohol intake; getting vaccinated against hepatitis B and human papillomavirus (HPV); reducing exposure to ultraviolet radiation from the sun; avoiding urban air pollution and indoor smoke from household use of solid fuels; and getting regular medical check-ups among others.

The WHO also underscored the importance of early detection. Cancer is more likely to respond to effective treatment when identified early, resulting in a greater probability of surviving as well as less disease severity.

The WHO highlighted two distinct strategies that promote early detection. First, early diagnosis to identify symptomatic cancer cases at the earliest possible stage. To this end, the general public should be made aware of the symptoms of different forms of cancer and of the importance of seeking medical advice when abnormal findings are observed.

Signs and symptoms caused by cancer vary depending on what part of the body is affected, according to the Mayo Clinic. Some general signs and symptoms associated with, but not specific to, cancer, include fatigue; a lump or area of thickening that can be felt under the skin; weight

changes, including unintended loss or gain; skin changes, such as yellowing, darkening, or redness of the skin, sores that won't heal, or changes to existing moles.

Other general signs are changes in bowel or bladder habits; a persistent cough or trouble breathing; difficulty swallowing; hoarseness; persistent indigestion or discomfort after eating; persistent, unexplained muscle or joint pain; persistent, unexplained fevers or night sweats; and unexplained bleeding or bruising.

Second, screening to identify individuals with abnormalities suggestive of a specific cancer or pre-cancer who have not developed any symptoms and refer them promptly for diagnosis and treatment.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) supports screening for breast, cervical, colorectal (colon), and lung cancers. These include mammography screening for breast cancer, Pap tests and HPV tests (including HPV DNA and mRNA test) for cervical cancer screening, screening tests for colorectal cancer (including stool tests, colonoscopy, and flexible sigmoidoscopy), and low-dose computed tomography (LDCT) for lung cancer screening.

Aside from improving public awareness of different cancer symptoms and encouraging people to seek care when these arise, the WHO's "Guide to cancer early diagnosis" recommends investing in strengthening and equipping health services and training health workers so they can conduct accurate and timely diagnostics and ensuring people living with cancer can access safe and effective treatment.

When fully implemented, the Universal Health Care (UHC) Act and the National Integrated Cancer Control Act (NICCA) will significantly enhance cancer care in the country and ease the heavy socioeconomic burden of the disease. In particular, NICCA has resulted in improved access to cancer centers, provision of financial support to patients, and the establishment of a multi-sectoral council for policymaking, planning, and coordination in cancer prevention and control, the WHO said.

The landmark legislation also paved the way for the establishment of the Cancer Assistance Fund which offers financial support for various interventions, and the Cancer and Supportive-Palliative Medicines Access Program which provides 61 medicines for the most common cancers for free through over 30 access sites across the country.

Furthermore, NICCA supports the Cancer Specialty Centers identified in the Philippine Health Facility Development Plan that provide comprehensive cancer care, along with the Primary Care Facilities that provide services for cancer prevention, screening, and early detection.

TEODORO B. PADILLA is the executive director of Pharmaceutical and Healthcare Association of the Philippines which represents the biopharmaceutical medicines and vaccines industry in the country. Its members are in the forefront of research and development efforts for COVID-19 and other diseases that affect Filipinos.