

ICCP Statement on the Importance of National Cancer Control Plans and COVID-19

The International Cancer Control Partnership (ICCP) is dedicated to assisting countries with developing and implementing National Cancer Control Plans (NCCP). This mission takes on an even more meaningful purpose in times such as these, as the COVID-19 global pandemic has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of health care systems around the world. The pandemic and its related health and economic strains highlight the importance of planning and investing in health systems to be capable in addressing the burden of all diseases, including cancer.

A NCCP should be viewed as part of a country's comprehensive health strategy, that plans for and strategizes approaches to address the cancer burden, including disparities and the need for equitable health services in that country. The cancer burden is increasing in many countries around the world. By 2040, The World Health Organization (WHO) states that 67% of annual cancer cases will be in low- and middle-income countries¹, many of which lack the health system infrastructure to properly detect, diagnose, and treat cancer. Yet, according to WHO, in 2020, only 56% of all countries have an operational cancer plan.²

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of a strong health system. NCCPs can assure integration of cancer services into the overall health system and the inclusion of cancer control interventions in national universal health care plans. The process of developing and implementing the plan puts in place the following elements that also can address country needs during times of pandemics such as COVID-19:

Increased financial, political and social support for cancer control. A NCCP addresses the need for having an organized, resourced and data-driven plan to address cancer control. The system improvements required for effective NCCPs also support other non-communicable diseases, particularly in the case of co-morbidities and common risk factors, and the population's health in general. Political leaders that are supportive of cancer control and strengthening health systems may be positioned to better respond to potential economic and health crises through continuing plans for Universal Health Coverage (UHC). A strong NCCP that supports cancer surveillance may also help countries to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on cancer incidence and mortality and to use that data to address the needs of patients. There will likely be an influx of past-due screenings and cancer diagnosis as these services return as COVID-19 restrictions are eased.

Multi-sector partnerships that bring together health care, government, civil society and the public. NCCPs are based on a multi-sectoral approach. This is essential for streamlining efforts, avoiding duplication, maximizing resources and mobilizing many sectors of society towards a common goal. Existing NCCP partnerships are well positioned to call upon each other during a pandemic to address multiple needs that require quick responses.

A plan for challenges – current and unexpected. A NCCP identifies and plans for essential resources in health care services throughout the country and for specific populations. Plans address these needs across the cancer control continuum; prevention, early detection, diagnosis, treatment and palliative care. The NCCP helps assure screening, laboratory and diagnostic services, essential treatment modalities and medicines, a workforce that meets the needs of the population, partners who can provide support care to cancer patients, and policies that support continued efforts in all these areas.

^{1,2} WHO report on cancer: setting priorities, investing wisely and providing care for all. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.