CERVICAL CANCER IN AFRICA: EARLY DETECTION AND TREATMENT OPTIONS

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Cervical cancer is the most common cancer in women of Africa. The highest incidence rate in the world in 2008 was in Guinea (56.3/100,000). The high incidence rate in Africa is due to poor awareness and unavailability of cervical cancer screening programmes. Cytology-based cervical cancer screening, has failed in Africa. This is because many countries in the region cannot afford the complex infrastructure required for a successful programme. Alternative methods like visual inspection with acetic acid and treatment of small precancerous lesions with cryotherapy have been found to be cost effective. A single visit approach using low cost and simple HPV test as primary screening followed by visual tests and treatment is a promising. Other treatment options like loop excision and cold knife cone biopsy may not be possible in many places because of lack of infrastructure and skilled personnel. Treatment of invasive cervical cancer in sub-Saharan Africa remains a major challenge, due to advanced stage at presentation and scarce therapy. 60-70% of patients with cervical cancer in Africa, have an indication for chemoradiation. Radiotherapy machines are not available in 29 of the 54 countries in Africa.

Palliative care a very important treatment option of invasive cancer was available in 13 of the 54 African countries in 2010. The majority of patients suffering severe cancer pain do not have access to morphine or adequate doses of it due to stringent narcotic regulatory laws by governments. Early detection and treatment of cervical cancer in Africa require political will and absolute commitment - governments in Africa must take up this task.