

Monday, February 05, 2024

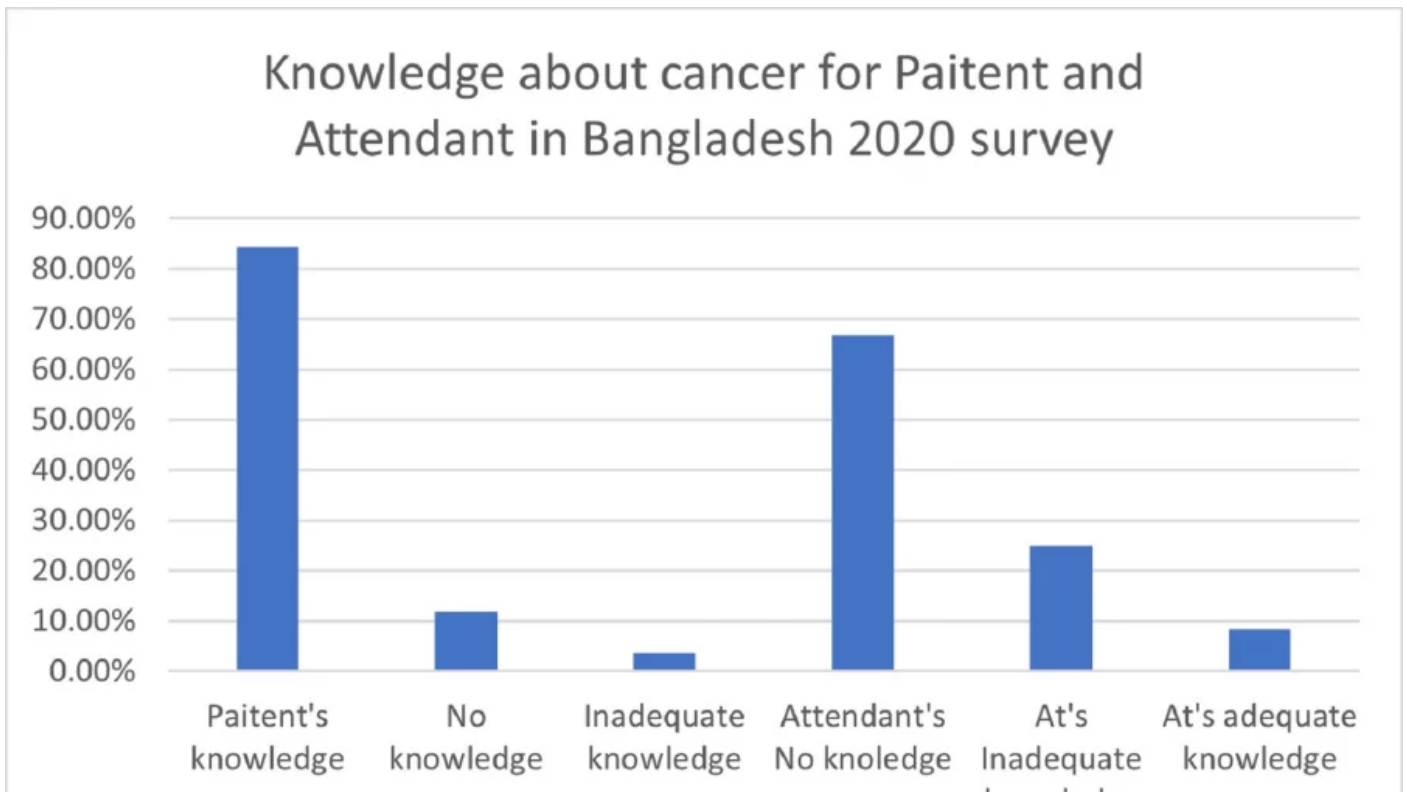
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Bridging the healthcare chasm in Bangladesh

E-paper

World Cancer Day 2024 aims to 'Close the Care Gap'



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World Cancer Day, observed on February 4 each year, is a global initiative dedicated to raising awareness about cancer and uniting people and organizations in the fight against the disease. In 2024, the theme for World Cancer Day is "Close the Care Gap." This theme highlights the urgent need to eliminate disparities in cancer care and ensure equitable access to quality treatment and support for cancer patients worldwide.

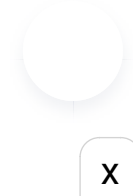
Cancer is the second-leading cause of death and represents a global annual economic impact of \$1.16 trillion. According to a latest World Health Organization (WHO) report, there are around 1.6 million cancer patients in Bangladesh with 150,000 dying each year.

The lack of access to healthcare facilities for cancer treatment in Bangladesh remains a pressing concern, posing significant challenges for individuals grappling with the disease. Rural areas, in particular, face the brunt of insufficient healthcare facilities, with individuals often having to travel far to reach specialized cancer treatment centres, exacerbating the logistical and financial burden on patients and their families. And in these healthcare facilities there is a notable deficit of advanced medical technologies and trained healthcare professionals proficient in cancer diagnosis and treatment.

This scarcity not only delays the initiation of timely and appropriate care, but also compromises the quality of treatment. Additionally, socioeconomic factors play a pivotal role, with marginalized populations finding it particularly challenging to access necessary healthcare services due to financial constraints.

Financial barriers

The astronomical costs of cancer treatment places a heavy burden on individuals and their families. The expenses associated with cancer care encompass a wide range of factors, including diagnostic procedures, surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and supportive care.



The high costs of advanced medical technologies and specialized medications further contribute to the financial strain. Many find themselves struggling with out-of-pocket expenses, even with partial coverage from health insurance, causing substantial financial distress. These financial barriers often force families to deplete their savings, sell assets, or incur substantial debts to afford necessary treatments. In some cases, individuals may forego, or delay seeking medical attention due to financial concerns, leading to delayed diagnoses, and compromised outcomes.

Addressing financial barriers to cancer care in developed countries like Bangladesh requires a multi-pronged approach, involving policy interventions to enhance insurance coverage, the negotiation of affordable drug pricing, and the implementation of support programs to alleviate the economic burden on affected individuals and families.

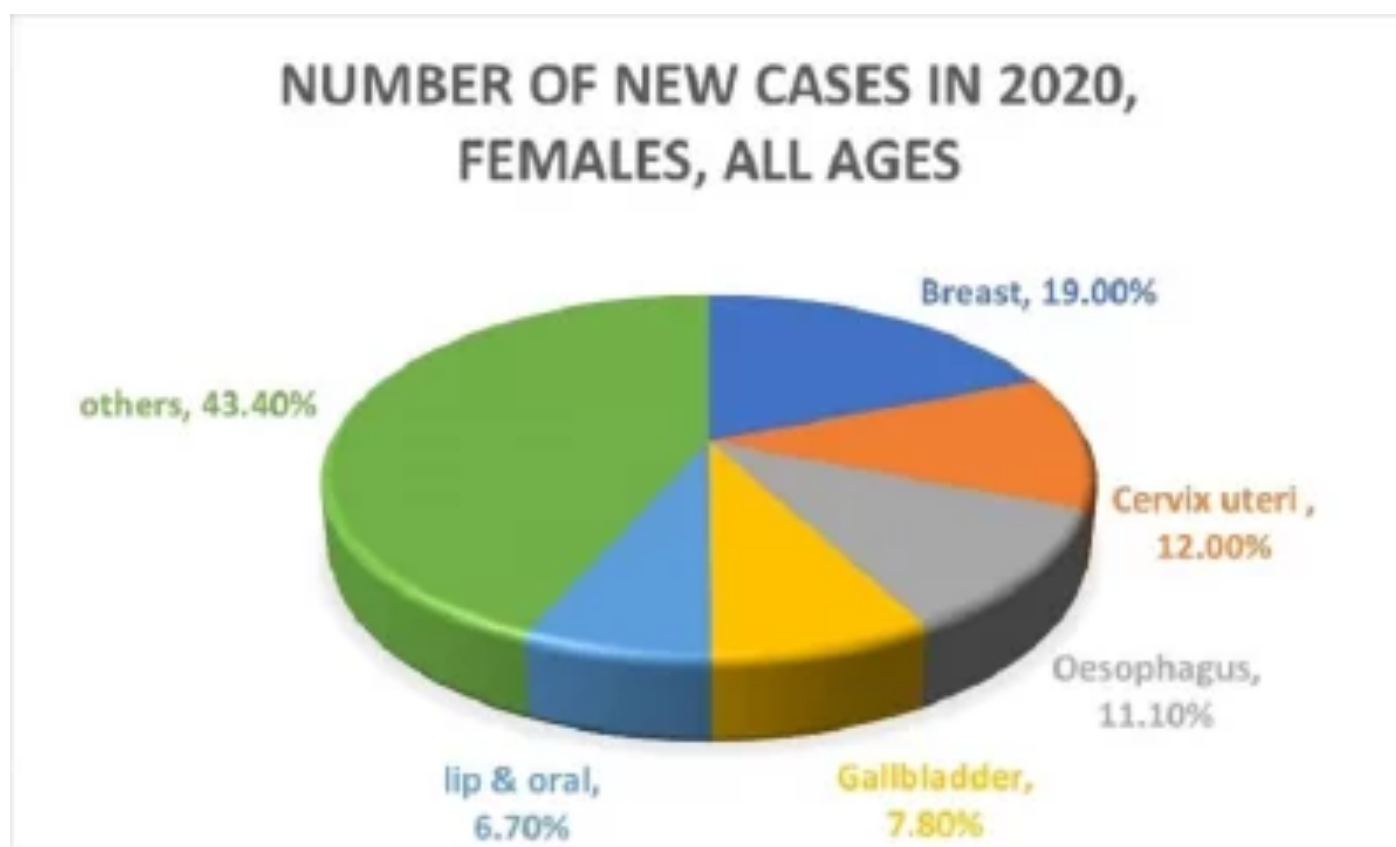


Chart1 WHO, Bangladesh Globacon 2020

Stigma

The societal stigma attached to cancer can be deeply entrenched in cultural beliefs and

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norms. Addressing these barriers necessitates comprehensive educational campaigns to dispel myths surrounding cancer, destigmatize the disease, and promote a culture of openness and acceptance. Culturally sensitive healthcare approaches, coupled with community engagement initiatives, are vital to breaking down these barriers and fostering an environment where individuals feel empowered to seek timely and effective cancer care in Bangladesh.

Public awareness campaigns must be launched to dispel misconceptions surrounding cancer. These campaigns should provide accurate information about the disease, emphasizing that cancer is a medical condition rather than a source of shame. These initiatives should be tailored to resonate with diverse communities across Bangladesh, considering regional variations in beliefs and practices.

Integrating cancer education into school curricula can play a pivotal role in fostering a more informed and empathetic society. By cultivating an understanding of cancer from an early age, future generations can contribute to reducing stigma and fostering a culture of support.

Community engagement programs should be developed to involve local leaders, religious figures, and influencers who can play a crucial role in challenging and reshaping cultural norms around cancer. Creating safe spaces for open discussions about cancer within communities can contribute to fostering a more supportive environment, providing patients and their families with a platform for sharing experiences, coping strategies, and mutual encouragement.

NUMBER OF NEW CASES IN 2020, ALL AGES MALE

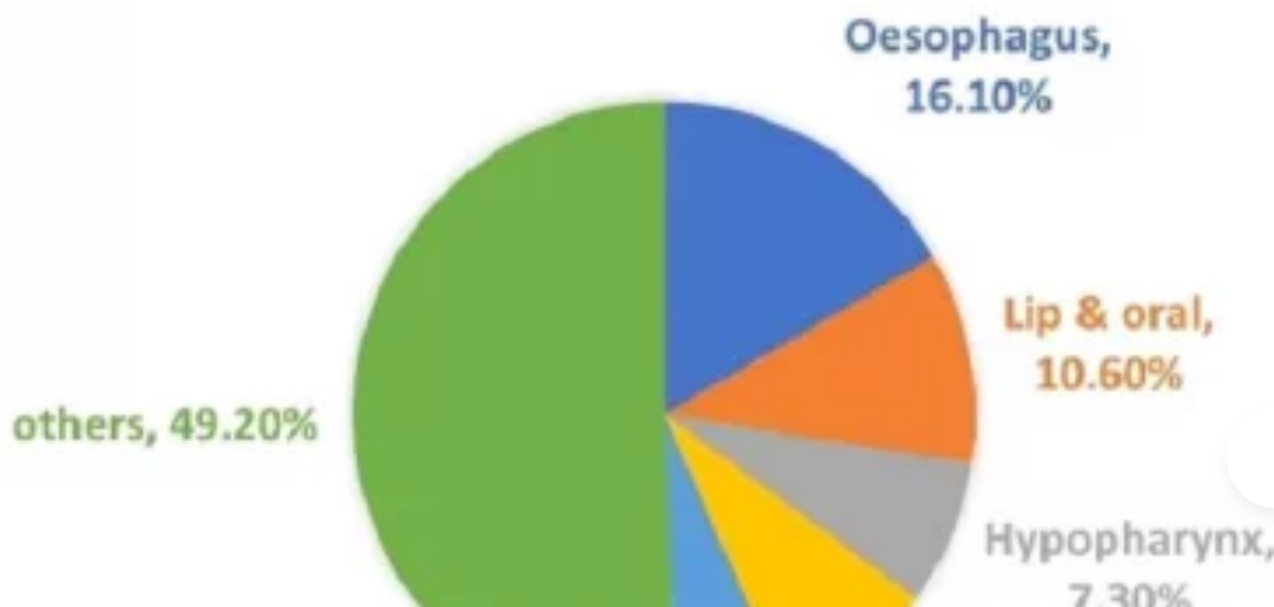




Chart2WHO, Bangladesh Globacon 2020

Awareness

When individuals are unaware of the early warning signs of cancer, they may neglect or misinterpret symptoms, leading to delayed medical consultations. This delay is particularly detrimental because many cancers are more treatable and have better prognosis when detected at an early stage. The lack of awareness can contribute to the progression of the disease to more advanced stages, making treatment more challenging and reducing the likelihood of successful outcomes. Moreover, a lack of awareness may contribute to unhealthy lifestyles and behaviours that increase the likelihood of developing cancer.

By raising awareness about cancer symptoms, risk factors, and the importance of preventive measures, communities can empower individuals to take charge of their health, seek timely medical attention, and adopt healthier lifestyles.

One noteworthy initiative is the community-based educational programs that leverage various communication channels, including television, radio, and social media, to disseminate accurate information about cancer symptoms, risk factors, and the importance of early diagnosis. These campaigns often involve collaborations between government health agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community leaders to ensure cultural sensitivity and relevance. As a result, individuals become more informed about the signs and symptoms of cancer, and understand the need for regular screenings and check-ups.

A comprehensive action plan fostering a healthcare system that ensures everyone has access to quality cancer care can include the following:

- **Strengthening healthcare infrastructure:** Invest in the establishment and enhancement of cancer treatment centres across the country, especially in rural and underserved areas.
- **Health workforce development:** Prioritize the training and recruitment of healthcare professionals specialized in oncology.
- **Health financing mechanisms:** Implement and expand health insurance programs to cover a broad spectrum of cancer care services.
- **Community awareness campaigns:** Launch targeted awareness campaigns to educate

the public about cancer prevention, early detection, and the importance of seeking medical attention.

- **Mobile Healthcare Units:** Introduce mobile healthcare units equipped for cancer screenings and basic diagnostics to reach remote and underserved areas.
- **Public-private partnerships:** Foster collaborations between government agencies, non-profit organizations, and private healthcare providers.
- **Telemedicine services:** Implement telemedicine services to provide remote consultations, follow-ups, and support for cancer patients.
- **Research and data collection:** Invest in cancer research to understand the unique challenges faced by the Bangladeshi population and tailor interventions accordingly.
- **Support systems and counseling:** Establish support groups and counseling services for cancer patients and their families.
- **Regular evaluation and adaptation:** Implement a system for regular evaluation of the action plan's effectiveness and adapt strategies based on evolving needs.

As Bangladesh observes World Cancer Day 2024, it is crucial to strengthen our resolve to bridge the healthcare divide and ensure that quality cancer care is accessible to all. By working together, we can create a healthcare system that leaves no one behind, providing equal opportunities for prevention and comprehensive cancer care.

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