

HUMAN
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WATCH



Needless Pain: Access to Palliative Care for Children in Kenya

Introduction: Palliative Care

- Palliative care: medical care that improves the quality of life of a patient with a life-threatening or chronic disease.
- WHO defines children's palliative care as „active total care of the child's body, mind and spirit“.
- Palliative care should go hand in hand with curative treatment, and can support curative treatment.
- Large need for children's palliative care in Africa

Pain treatment

- Recommended medication for severe, chronic pain in children: oral morphine (essential medicine - WHO).
- 60-90 % of patients with advanced cancer experience moderate to severe pain.
- ART scale-up does not make pain treatment obsolete:
 - severe pain in the last phase of HIV (up to 80 %)
 - about half of children who need ART are still not getting it in Kenya
 - resistances
 - neuropathic pain

Kenya: Palliative care on the margins

- No policy on palliative care
- Few PC services in hospitals and community-based care. No children's palliative care services.
- Only 7 out of 250 public hospitals have morphine
- Treatment of severe pain in children with analgesics, rarely DF 118
- Poor availability of drugs for neuropathic pain
- Lack of health worker training and practice in treating pain with opioids
 - Assumption: opioids only for terminally ill, so „giving up“ on child.
 - Fear of treating children

- Poor communication with parents and child patients. Lack of child psychologists or other staff trained to deal with psychological impact.
- Lack of information on palliative care and attitudes by parents and caregivers: Pain must be endured.
- Child protection issue: Some children who are seriously ill suffer neglect (in particular HIV orphans)

What does the government need to do?

- Make oral morphine available in district, provincial and hospitals
- Create palliative care units with children's expertise in hospitals
- Roll out a program of home-based palliative care
- Develop a policy and plan of action, with a focus on children
- Improve training for health workers
- Make palliative care an integral part of the HIV/AIDS response

What can you do? (health workers/practicioners)

- Ask any child patient about pain and encourage parents to do so
- Refer children with undiagnosed pain to higher-level facilities for diagnosis and treatment
- Refer children with diagnosed pain to hospitals with palliative care units or to hospices
- Ensure your services have essential pain medicines, including oral morphine and drugs for neuropathic pain
- Ensure your services provide psychological support for children
- Train in children's palliative care or hire staff with expertise

