Scaling up palliative care in Kenya

The need for palliative care is growing. Over 70 medical professionals met in Nairobi to discuss the essential work taking place towards scaling up palliative care in Kenya, writes Michael Mueni to discuss the essential work taking place towards scaling up palliative care in Kenya, writes LAWRENCE MBAE.

Cancer cases are on the rise across the globe, and in places with limited resources, palliative care is often the only form of treatment. In Africa, HIV affects almost every community directly or indirectly and it is becoming more common in other parts of the world too. In many countries, the proportion of elderly people is growing, increasing the need for caring for those with progressive and incurable diseases.

In Kenya, life-threatening illnesses such as cancer, HIV/AIDS, and diabetes. "These conditions contribute greatly to the total disease burden and unfortunately, the country does not have adequate data to highlight the burden these diseases.

It is therefore, possible that the actual need for palliative care services in the country is underestimated," says Dr. Francis Kimani, head of medical services.

Awareness about the causes of life-threatening diseases, their prevention and available treatment options is low in Kenya and, unfortunately, many people are unable to know about these diseases once a diagnosis is made.

"Screening and early detection are uncommon due to limited awareness among the public, and when cancer patients learn of their condition when the disease is at an advanced stage," says Dr. Kimani.

Available treatment options are very expensive in many Kenyans and as a result, many of those diagnosed undergo unsustained pain and suffering.

Dr. Kimani was speaking during the opening of a conference sponsored by The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund and organized by the Kenya Hospices and Palliative Care Association (KEHPCA) and the AFRICAN Palliative Care Association. (APCA).

He said basic symptom control and palliative care is not expensive and do not require specially trained personnel but are lacking even where health structures and home based care (HBC) programmes are in place.

CHALLENGES

Inadequate drug supplies are partly to blame, but equally important is lack of basic understanding of palliative care among health care workers at all levels.

Unfortunately, Dr. Zipporah Ali, the national coordinator at KEHPCA says health care professionals in many African countries are not well trained to take care of patients with life limiting illnesses.

"It is a time that every health care professional understands the basics of taking care of patients with life limiting illnesses," adds Dr. Ali.

Kenya is one of the countries that are making progress to ensure that health care professionals are trained in palliative care. The process of integrating palliative care into the curricula of health care professionals in Africa began in 2009 and since then, KEHPCA has been working with 17 institutions in Kenya and other sub-Saharan African countries to train health care professionals in palliative care.

One of the challenges facing the development of palliative care in Kenya is the lack of professional palliative care nurses with postgraduate training.

According to Rose Omuntanyo, the director, Cicely McDowsdell School of nursing at Nairobi hospital, post basic training for staff is essential to updating them on skills in pain management, diabetic management, basic and advanced life support and other training in nursing and medical students started in 1992 and is done every year from training department in conjunction with the hospital.

The process of integrating palliative care involves the review of the curriculum. Currently, KEHPCA has successfully trained 53 instructors who have been instrumental in pushing for the integration in the respective institutions.

Among the institutions, Moi University School of medicine has introduced a module focusing on chronic disease management and palliative care in its fourth year of study. Kisii School of Nursing has dedicated 19 hours to palliative care, while Kenya Medical Training College is working to establish diploma courses in palliative care.

The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund stresses the need for palliative care to be available to all those living with HIV and AIDS, cancer and other life limiting illnesses by scaling up services, developing education and training, advocacy and research and evaluation.