Namibia doctors fight cervical cancer



Helping patients

NAMIBIA — The cervical cancer rate in Namibia is 37.5 for every 100,000 women, about three times higher than the rate worldwide. health worker administers a cervical cancer vaccine HPV Gardasil to a girl on the street in Ibadan, Nigeria, on May 27, 2024. More than half of Africa's 54 nations – 28 – have introduced the vaccine in their immunization programs

Namibia doctors fight cervical cancer

FILE - A health worker administers a cervical cancer vaccine HPV Gardasil to a girl on the street in Ibadan, Nigeria, on May 27, 2024. More than half of Africa's 54 nations – 28 – have introduced the vaccine in their immunization programs.

FILE - A health worker administers a cervical cancer vaccine HPV Gardasil to a girl on the street in Ibadan, Nigeria, on May 27, 2024. More than half of Africa's 54 nations – 28 – have introduced the vaccine in their immunization programs.

WINDHOEK, NAMIBIA —

The cervical cancer rate in Namibia is 37.5 for every 100,000 women, about three times higher than the rate worldwide. Cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers and doctors in Namibia are advocating greater access to healthcare and the HPV vaccine to reduce the prevalence of the disease.

November 2009 was a turning point in the life of Barbara Kamba-Nyathi. At the tender age of 29, she was diagnosed with stage three cervical cancer.

Her doctors recommended radiation therapy as opposed to chemotherapy, because at that time she had not yet had children and radiation therapy would help her avoid premature menopause.

But that was not her only struggle. Kamba-Nyathi, who lived in Windhoek at the time, said she faced stigma for cervical cancer's association with HIV and the human papilloma virus.

"One of the challenges that come with having a diagnosis like cervical cancer is that our African society its usually taboo to talk about things of our reproductive organs, you know, our reproductive system is taboo," said Kamba-Nyathi. "We don't talk about such things and in the end, we tend to normalize pain and even things that don't feel right in our bodies we tend to normalize them and they become part of our identity."

Rolf Hansen, the chief executive officer of the Cancer Association of Namibia, said a lack of education and a lack of access to healthcare prevent many women from getting tested or being treated for cervical cancer or HPV, which is the second-leading cause of cancer among sub-Saharan women.

"Like I said, HIV and HPV work hand in hand to fuel the cervical cancer pandemic," said Hansen. "Now, in our country as well we see that in our low-income setting as well as our rural setting, we have high HPV prevalence, high cervical cancer so a lot of work needs to be done at a grassroots level so that we can actually combat this disease."

Doctors Simon and David Emvula provide health services to underprivileged communities, together with the Be Free/Break Free program — an initiative of former first lady Monica Geingos — in Namibia's largest township of Katutura. They are advocating for the rollout of the HPV vaccine for girls between the ages of 9 and 14, before they become sexually active.

Emvula said that during one screening in Windhoek on Saturday, they treated more than 100 patients, screening girls and women for HPV, cervical cancer, fibroids and other sexually transmitted infections and sexually transmitted diseases.

Emvula spoke to VOA at his practice in Windhoek.

"The turnout was actually beyond what we expected and once again it was an eye-opener ... that there is definitely a need for that," said

Emvula.

Emvula said HPV vaccination is among the most effective ways to prevent cervical cancer but the government of Namibia is lagging. HPV vaccines have been introduced in 129 countries worldwide and the Namibian government has endorsed the rollout of the vaccines for girls ages 9 to 14. Despite promises made as reported by VOA last year, the vaccines have not yet been made available.

Namibia's executive director of health, Ben Nangombe, could not be reached for comment.

LENS ASIA