

CHILDHOOD CANCER

Childhood cancer care heavily impacted by pandemic

A global assessment of the impact of Covid-19 on paediatric cancer care showed that care was affected at more than three-quarters of hospitals



The pandemic has had a “substantial” impact on childhood cancer care worldwide, with a marked rise in the number of patients abandoning treatment altogether, new research showed Thursday (March 4, 2021).

Covid-19 has placed huge pressure on hospitals and healthcare systems, particularly in developing nations, as most medical facilities have been inundated with Covid-19 patients.

A global assessment of the impact of Covid-19 on paediatric cancer care showed that care was affected at more than three-quarters (78%) of hospitals.

Almost half (43%) reported diagnosing fewer new cases than expected, while 34% reported a rise in the number of patients who stopped treatment.

Perhaps most worryingly, 7% of hospitals surveyed reported having to close their paediatric cancer units entirely at some stage during the pandemic.

Vast majority were in low and middle income countries

The vast majority of these — 87% — were in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

“Hospitals in LMICs were under strain even before the pandemic, with fewer resources and less access to care for children with cancer,” said Daniel Moreira, managing director of the US’s St Jude Children’s Research Hospital.

“So our results seem to reflect the relative strength of different healthcare systems around the world.”

Among the more than 200 hospitals contacted in 79 countries for the survey, 79 percent reported a reduction in child cancer surgery.

More than half noted shortages in blood products and 57 percent reported shortages of chemotherapy treatment.

The pandemic also diverted resources such as funding and bed base from childhood cancer care, according to the survey results published in The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health journal.

Around one third (32 percent) of hospitals surveyed reported decreased financial support, while 19 percent reported a reduction in available beds.

Writing in a linked comment article to the survey, Soad Fuentes-Alabi, of El Salvador's Ayudame a Vivir Foundation Medical Center said the research showed the struggles experienced by childhood cancer patients in less-developed countries.

"The common issues of late diagnosis and treatment abandonment or interruptions have worsened during the pandemic," she said. **-AFP, Paris, March 4, 2021P**