Key issues

Beyond physical: mental and emotional impact

An initiative of

uicc global cancer control

Quality cancer care includes dignity, respect, support and love and considers not just the physical impact of cancer but respects the emotional, sexual and social wellbeing of each individual and their carer.

Preserving dignity

Many cancer patients and their families describe feeling a loss of control of their lives after a cancer diagnosis. Patients and families should be empowered to participate actively in decisions about their care and treatment plan which respects their individual needs and preferences. This can go a long way in helping individuals to regain a sense of control and preserve their dignity throughout their cancer journey.

People-centred, dignity-conserving care:
This approach means moving towards empowering individuals with cancer to take part in decisions, and to have all their care needs addressed holistically - physical, emotional, spiritual, and social[1,2].

Body image and sexual wellbeing

Physical changes that can occur during and after treatment such as the removal of a part of the body, hair loss, speech impairment or urinary incontinence can affect the way patients look and feel about themselves. Issues of body image and sexuality can have a significant impact on partner relationships, with cancer patients and survivors facing issues around self-esteem and sexual intimacy.

Support and love

Studies have found that cancer support groups can enhance self-esteem, reduce depression, decrease anxiety and improve relationships with family members and friends. For a person living with cancer, strong emotional support and loving relationships with partners, friends and families can make a big difference in their life.

Key issues
Beyond physical: mental and emotional impact

Caregivers

Cancer carers – most commonly partners, family members or friends – often receive little preparation, information, or support to carry out their vital role. Often, carers also put their own needs and feelings aside to focus on the person with cancer which can lead social isolation and depression in some cases.

The power of colleagues

Many people living with cancer want to return to work. Sometimes the people at work make up another vital network of support. Talking about cancer with colleagues as well as keeping in touch during work absences can have a positive impact on recovery[3].

What can we do?

- **As individuals** – find out more about cancer services in your country or region, help to share accurate information about cancer to dispel myths and misconceptions, support those individuals around you
- **As caregivers** – take advantage of support services in your country or region or online to support yourself and your family member/friend with cancer, these services might be able to direct you to more resources
- **As employers/colleagues** – explore how you can support colleagues or employees with cancer (or caregivers) through measures like flexible working hours or creating an open environment to talk (or not talk) about cancer.

1. WHO (2014). Strengthening of palliative care as a component of integrated treatment throughout the life course. A67/31 4 April 2014.
2. Managing body image difficulties of adult cancer patients: Lessons from available research. Cancer. 120:633–41.
3. Macmillan Cancer Support. Work and Cancer. http://www.macmillan.org.uk/Cancerinformation/ Livingwithandaftercancer/Workandcancer/Workandcancer.aspx