

Second Special Session of the World Health Assembly

29 November 2021 - 1 December 2021

Agenda item 2

Statement of the International Society for Paediatric Oncology (SIOP)

Non-State Actor in Official Relations with WHO

SIOP calls on Member States to ensure that vulnerable young people with life-threatening diseases, e.g., cancer, adversely affected by pandemic-delayed diagnosis and therapy are considered in pandemic response planning.

Childhood cancer remains a major public health and socio-economic issue globally; cancer affects 1/430 children by 15 years, and 1/320 by 19 years.

Successful and cost-effective childhood cancer treatment increasingly leads to improved survival including in resource-limited settings. The WHO's "Global Initiative for Childhood Cancer" is driving transformational change to achieve at least 60% survival by 2030.

COVID-19 has hindered further progress and even reversed gains to date in pediatric cancer. International peer-reviewed studies highlight:

- An over 40% decline in new diagnoses indicative of COVID-19-related late presentation
- Over 70% of childhood cancer facilities had treatment interruption or delays
- Transfers of specialty staff to COVID services occurred in 45% of centres

Late diagnoses, protocol diversion, and treatment interruptions and abandonment all contribute to sub-optimal outcomes and avoidable loss of life. Yet, during COVID-19, in Ghana, online and face-to-face healthcare professional training on early signs of childhood cancers triggered an almost 30% increase in new diagnoses; Nigeria offered online training for paediatric radiation professionals in 20 African countries. These initiatives strengthened cancer diagnosis and service delivery.

As an essential part of pandemic planning, we encourage a focus on healthcare worker protection, particularly nurses bearing a compounded burden of direct care for patients, themselves, and their own families. The emotional and physical toll on the health workforce has become evident as overburdened and short-staffed units struggle to provide appropriate cancer care especially in settings with minimal access to vaccines and personal protection equipment.

