

Cancer treatment challenges during Gaza's humanitarian crisis

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Dear Editor,

With interest we read your call for a special issue on the health implications and medical risks of the war in Gaza. The ongoing conflict in Gaza has created an unparalleled medical and public health crisis. The health impact on civilians, especially vulnerable groups, such as children and the elderly, has reached a critical level as the war continues.

The Gaza Strip, a densely populated enclave, has experienced years of conflict and humanitarian crises, exacerbating the suffering of its inhabitants (1). Bombing and destruction have had severe negative impact on public health indicators in Gaza. As of 1 August 2024, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates showed that more than 49 480 people had been killed in the war, of which more than 16 314 were children and more than 10 980 were women (2,3). More than 91 128 others had been injured. Patients suffering from cancer are among the most vulnerable because the war severely restricts their access to life-saving treatments. There are approximately 10 000 cancer cases as more than 2000 people, including 122 children, are diagnosed with cancer each year in Gaza (4,5).

Many cancer patients have died in Gaza, causing immense suffering for their families. This correspondence highlights the dire situation faced by cancer patients in Gaza and calls for urgent international attention and intervention.

The Israeli war in Gaza has had devastating consequences for cancer patients, exacerbating their already challenging circumstances. The blockade and restrictions on movement imposed by Israel have severely limited access to essential medical supplies, including chemotherapy drugs, radiotherapy equipment and diagnostic tools. Because of this, cancer patients in Gaza often do not receive timely and adequate treatment, ultimately resulting in poor health outcomes and high mortality rate.

The healthcare infrastructure in Gaza, already strained by years of blockade and underinvestment, is

ill-equipped to meet the needs of cancer patients. The inadequate resources, including medical equipment, medical supplies and trained personnel, means that Gaza's cancer patients often face critical delays in diagnosis and treatment. The frequent power outages and fuel shortages further exacerbate the problems at medical facilities, causing treatment schedules to be disrupted and patient care to be compromised (6).

Beyond the physical challenges, cancer patients in Gaza also face significant psychosocial distress as a result of the conflict, violence, loss of loved ones and displacement. This has led to psychological stress, including anxiety, fear and hopelessness. This psychological burden further complicates their ability to cope with the disease and adhere to their treatment regimens. Mental health resources in Gaza are scarce, and the needs of cancer patients are often not a priority (6). The international community must pay urgent attention to the plight of cancer patients in Gaza and take immediate action to alleviate their suffering. We call on humanitarian organizations, governments and healthcare providers to prevail on Israel to unblock Gaza and remove movement restrictions to ensure unhindered access to essential medical supplies and services; increase humanitarian aid and support to strengthen the healthcare infrastructure in Gaza, including providing medical equipment, medications, and trained medical personnel; ensure free and regular internet connection that can support telemedicine services for cancer patients in Gaza; and support psychosocial programmes that address the mental health needs of cancer patients and their families, including counselling services and other community-based interventions.

The war in Gaza has caused untold suffering for its inhabitants, particularly the most vulnerable, including cancer patients. Immediate action should be taken to reduce the suffering of cancer patients in Gaza and ensure that they have access to dignified, reliable and sustainable health care services.

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