

INCIDENCE OF WOMEN CANCER IN SRI LANKA: A GROWING PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGE

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Abstract

Sri Lanka is an island nation located in South Asia with 22 million population. Increasing deaths due to rising non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is a huge challenge for Sri Lanka. Cancer has reached a state whereby it is one of the leading causes of death in the world amidst huge challenges posed to health care, especially in developing countries. The burden of cancer in Sri Lanka is on the rise, and some cancers have imposed their burden, particularly upon women. It is attributed to changes in lifestyle and environmental exposures, apart from the aging of the population. In women, the most prevalent cancers include those of the breast, cervix, thyroid, and ovaries, reflecting both global trends and local health challenges. The Government of Sri Lanka, with international health organizations, has taken cognizance of this emerging burden and is working toward formulating policies on prevention, early detection, and treatment to moderate the impact of cancer on the health of women.

Keywords: *women cancer, disease burden, health of women*

Introduction

Cancer is the leading cause of death worldwide, and signs of the condition are becoming increasingly prevalent in highly affected areas such as Sri Lanka. As Sri Lanka experiences a demographic shift with a rising aging population, non-communicable disease burdens include cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer burden. Of all the issues relating to public health, perhaps the gravest is that women are more likely than men to be afflicted by certain types of cancers. This is because women are more likely to be diagnosed with cancer than men. Precisely, this is because a variety of cancers are significantly prevalent among the general public. It is not only a cause for concern but also a matter of distress that the number of cancers that have been identified in Sri Lanka has come out to be increased. This is a cause for alarm. A few examples of diseases that fall under

this group are cancers of the breast, cervix, thyroid, and ovaries. It is due to this that a few critical issues arise for the health care system. This paper will provide an overview of the underlying causes of such a tendency, as well as gauge the actions that are being done in response to this public health concern. Additionally, the paper will also examine the activities that are being taken. Other than that, it will also provide an overview of the current trends of cancer incidence among persons who are female. Furthermore, this page provides an analysis of the outcomes achieved because of such efforts. The study is based on various unique sets of information that were gathered from publications issued by the Ministry of Health of Sri Lanka, the World Health Organization, and articles from Google Scholar and PubMed.

Impact of Rising Cancer Burden among Women in Sri Lanka

The rising incidence of women's cancers presents substantial economic challenges. Increased healthcare costs for diagnostics, treatments and rehabilitation strain the public health sector, and productivity losses occur due to reduced labor force participation, as women in their prime working years face illness. This is not only reducing household income but also increasing poverty, especially in low-income families. Additional pressure emerges as caregiving responsibilities shift to the family members. Recent statistics highlight that the total workforce consists of 8.5 million individuals in Sri Lanka with women accounting for 35 percent of the total working population (Department of Census and Statistics, 2022). Women in Sri Lanka have equal access to receiving education, but women's participation remains lower than men's due to various family responsibilities including caregiving, and limited access to flexible work opportunities. Therefore, Sri Lankan women often face significant health financing challenges, largely due to their lower labor force participation and income level. This dependency exacerbates their vulnerability, as they may have inadequate health financing sources leading to out-of-pocket expenditure that can be a burden for someone in the family (World Health Organization, 2023).

Current Status of Cancer Affected Women in Sri Lanka

In all, new cases of cancer totaled 33,243 in Sri Lanka in the year 2022, from which 17,510 were reported to have occurred among females out of the total number (Weerakoon, 2024). As this shows a large increase in the number of people who have ever been diagnosed with cancer, this is typical of wider patterns found around the world in which cancer continues to be one of the major causes of

death. (*Demographic Characteristics of Oncologists in Sri Lanka, 2020*).

Breast cancer remains the only kind of cancer that is diagnosed more often in women compared to any other type of cancer. According to the National Cancer Institute, it accounts for 26 percent of all cases of cancer that are diagnosed in females across the country. It accounts for nine percent of all cases of cellular cancer and is thus the second most common type of cancer that women suffer from. Nine percent of all cases are made up of cellular cancer. Besides this, it is also the most common type of cancer overall. The other two types of cancer, thyroid cancer, and ovarian cancer are also examples of the most common types of cancer seen in females. Consequently, because of these data, there is an urgent need for cancer control and preventive programs that would be largely focused on women in order to combat the rising burden of malignancies afflicting women in Sri Lanka. These facilities should be primarily accessible to women. (Mannapperuma, Salibi and Tzenios, 2024a)

The age-standardized incidence rate for breast cancer in Sri Lanka is anticipated to be 27.3/100000 women in 2022. This is based on estimates taken into consideration. If this happens, then breast cancer will replace cervical cancer as the most prevalent form of cancer that strikes women in the South Asian country.

Number of New Women Cancer Cases in 2022, Sri Lanka

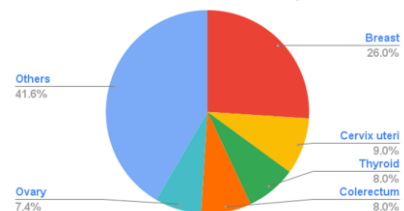


Figure 1 Number of new cases in 2022 female in all ages in Sri Lanka

Source: Weekly Epidemiological Report, Ministry of Health, 2024

Figure 1 shows that Sri Lanka currently has a substantial number of cancer cases among women in 2022. Breast cancer remains the leading cause of death among women accounting for 26 percent in Sri Lanka. This appallingly high percentage is representative of a more general trend that can be seen all over the world.

Cervical cancer followed at 9 percent while thyroid contributed 8 percent and colorectum cancer contributed 8 percent of the total cases. Ovarian cancer made up 7.4 percent. The remaining 41.6 percent comprised other cancers. This distribution shows the urgent need for awareness among women, early detection and preventive healthcare strategies to reduce the burden of cancer among women in Sri Lanka.

Reasons for Increasing Cancer Disease Among Women in Sri Lanka

Probably the increasing trend in the number of cancer cases that are being diagnosed among females in Sri Lanka could be attributed to a diverse range of different factors, each playing a role in the overall trend. It is pointed out that lifestyle changes, which involve dietary changes, less exercise, and more intake of alcohol, are all related to a greater risk for cancer. While obesity has already been identified to be one of the leading risk factors linked to many types of cancers, like cancers of the breast and ovaries, the alarming rise of obesity rates in urban populations raises genuine grounds for concern. This is so because urban people are more likely to be obese. (Madushanka, 2024)

This is because, many times, obesity is mentioned as one of the contributing risk factors of the concerned diseases. Similarly, aside from these environmental factors, other environmental elements contribute a great deal. Exposure of a person to pollutants from industrial emissions and to waste inappropriate management methods heightens the

danger of having cancer, increasing the chances that the individual gets cancer. Apart from Sri Lanka's population being an aging one, there is another factor that naturally contributes to the rising cases of cancer in the country (Vithana, P 2021). Moreover, the virus that most significantly contributes to the development of cancer is the human papillomavirus. Conclusion Genetic predispositions are very influential in the development of cancer. The cancers that are a cause of human papillomavirus keep being a concern; thus, the essence of keeping public health measures and immunization is warranted. There is reason for anxiety in that direction though vaccinations as such are not difficult to bring to the market.

Challenges in the Treatment and Management of Cancer Burden

Despite all the efforts taken by the government of Sri Lanka as well as by the health care system, there are a few obstacles that need to be overcome to attain the goal of successfully managing the burden of cancer within the nation. Resources such as healthcare facilities and skilled individuals who can make the entire treatment work are limited. This is particularly the case in rural areas. This is particularly true since there are more patients who are in dire need of treatment compared to other areas. When it comes to looking at this from the perspective of the sixth source, it is very relevant to take into account. This often results in delayed diagnosis and treatment, as modern diagnostic and treatment facilities are few and far between. Their illnesses might therefore have poor outcomes because of this delay. Although most of the patients have some form of ailments that prevent them from acquiring the necessary treatment owing to either financial incapacitation or large distances that exist between them and the healthcare facilities, these are further worsened by the fact that there is inequality in both geography and economics. Medical treatment due to cultural and societal

barriers cannot be provided to a significant proportion of female patients. Lack of awareness regarding the early onset signs is one such barrier. The stigma associated with cancer is another obstacle.

Growing cancer cases among women in Sri Lanka every day show that this is a critical health problem within the country and urges that what they do is necessary and should be done as soon as possible. There is yet much that needs to be done on a number of fronts to make the situation a little better. Such fronts will involve the development of cancer treatment services, the development of technologies for early detection of cancers, and in the prevention of cancers. While the implementation of national goals and efforts has achieved some progress, this is the scenario that has come about as a result of the situation. Important measures need to be put into place in order to facilitate the reduction of the burden of cancer borne by women in Sri Lanka. The other necessities to be brought into place relate to enlightenment in the public, the infrastructure of health, and a policy to ensure that there is equality in accessing the treatment of cancer for every person. It may well be that, with the current challenges faced by the country having been overcome, Sri Lanka will be able to improve outcomes in cancer treatment and the livelihoods of those affected by the disease (Vithana *et al.*, 2021).

Summery

The increasing incidence of women's cancer in Sri Lanka is producing considerable economic strain on both the healthcare system and households. Rising healthcare costs and reduced labor force participation rates among women lead to large productivity losses and widening socio-economic disparities. Addressing these challenges requires broad policy interventions to improve healthcare

accessibility and increasing health literacy among women in Sri Lanka to control financial burden and mitigate health challenges in Sri Lanka.

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