World Cancer Day: Closing the Gap

Imagine a world where millions of cancer deaths are prevented and access to lifesaving cancer treatment and care is equitable for all.

February 4, 2022 By Bob Barnett

Launched in 2000 by the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), World Cancer Day is held every February 4. This year's theme, "Close the Care Gap," kicks off a three-year campaign to promote equity in health care for all populations.

"This year's World Cancer Day theme, 'Close the Care Gap,' speaks to the heart of what it means to achieve progress against cancer today," said Julie Gralow, MD, FACP, FASCO, chief medical officer for the American Society of Clinical Oncology in a press release about the awareness day. "In the shadow of COVID's terrible and unequal toll, health equity needs to be a central motivation for all of us working in cancer care and research. It's time to truly move the needle so underserved communities in the United States and around the world can receive the high-quality equitable care they deserve.

"Here in the United States, even as we have achieved consistent declines in cancer death rates over the several decades, systemic inequities have kept many communities from experiencing the same progress. According to recent data from the American Cancer Society, Black men remain twice as likely as white men to die of prostate cancer; Black women are 40% more likely than white women to die of breast cancer; and Hispanic individuals are more likely than white individuals to be diagnosed with advanced stages of cancer, leading to worse outcomes after diagnosis." The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing disparities that range from screening to cancer outcomes, Gralow noted.

"Who you are or where you live should not determine how long you live," said Robert W. Carlson, MD, the chief executive officer of the National Comprehensive Cancer Network (NCCN), in a statement. "Yet we know disparities in cancer care and outcomes exist between the United States and other countries and within the U.S. itself between different races/ethnicities, socioeconomic groups, sexual orientations, gender identities, regions and more. Today and every day, we must uncover and address the significant barriers that prevent too many people from receiving high-quality cancer care."

The NCCN statement elaborates as follows:

The World Health Organization, previously announced a global strategy for eliminating cervical cancer as part of World Cancer Day activities. According to UICC, the five-year survival rate for cervical cancer in the United States is 71% for white women in the U.S., but only 58% for Black women. More than 90% of cervical cancer mortality occurs in low- and middle-income countries. Childhood cancer survival rates reach more than 80% in high-income countries but can be as low as 20% in low-income countries. Notable differences exist in cancer-related outcomes for rural and nonrural patients, even in high-income countries, such as the U.S.

“As individuals, as communities, we can and must come together and break down barriers,” said Cary Adams, MBA, CEO of UICC in the statement. “We have achieved a lot in the last decade in cancer care and control around the world but not addressing inequities in society is slowing our progress. Closing the care gap is about fairness, dignity and fundamental rights to allow everyone to lead longer lives in better health.”

The NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines in Oncology, the statement continues, “can be a resource providing guardrails to standardize best available quality in cancer care and prevent inappropriate or inadequate management.

Numerous independent studies show that standardized care improves outcomes but is not always applied equally to all patient groups. More on this can be found at NCCN.org/wcd.”

ASCO, noted Gralow, “has a long history of working toward equitable cancer care and research, and most recently issued ASCO’s Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Action Plan: A Legacy of Commitment, A Future of Promise for All Individuals with Cancer, which is designed to infuse equity throughout the society’s activities. We lend our support to World Cancer Day as a unique opportunity to draw international attention on the need to accelerate progress we’ve seen in cancer prevention, screening, care and outcomes and make headway toward true equity for all individuals with cancer.

Gralow continued,“We are also encouraged by President Biden’s announcement to reignite the Cancer Moonshot with a major focus on equity, diversity and inclusion. This heightened attention can propel us to invest even more of our time, energy and resources in closing the remaining gaps. This World Cancer Day, we must all commit to ensuring that everyone, no matter who they are, where they live or their socioeconomic status, can benefit fully from advances in cancer science and patient care.”

Learn more at WorldCancerDay.org.

To read Cancer Health stories about individuals working to close the gap, see the features “Cancer Health 25: Black Lives Matter,” “Finding Grace in Adversity,” about a young Latino man who is encouraging fellow Latinos to enroll in clinical trials and “Purpose,” in which an Asian woman with lung cancer explores how the unique genetics of this disease in nonsmoking Asian women is belatedly being researched. For more news about efforts to achieve equity in cancer care, see Cancer Health’s health equity landing page.

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