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## Cancer in sub-Saharan Africa: building local capacity for data production, analysis, and interpretation

**Lyon, France, 10 May 2022** – A new research article by scientists from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), published in *The Lancet Oncology*,<sup>1</sup> reports on the cancer burden in sub-Saharan Africa using estimates of national cancer incidence and mortality from the IARC GLOBOCAN 2020 database.

The authors focus on the availability of the underlying recorded data across the region, arguing that investment in the primary source of information – population-based cancer registries – equips the individual countries with the continuous data necessary to plan and inform national cancer services.

### Cancer in sub-Saharan Africa

Cancer is a major public health problem in sub-Saharan Africa, affecting many of the region's 1 billion inhabitants. The disease is among the three leading causes of premature death (i.e. at ages 30–69 years) in almost all constituent countries<sup>2</sup> and is responsible for 1 in 7 premature deaths overall and 1 in 4 deaths from noncommunicable diseases.<sup>3</sup>

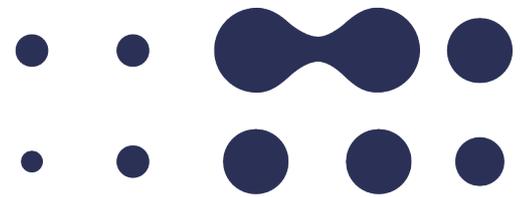
The new report provides an overview of the cancer burden in terms of numbers and patterns of cancer across the region:

- A total of 801 392 new cancer cases and 520 158 cancer deaths were estimated to have occurred in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020.
- Female breast cancer (129 400 cases) and cervical cancer (110 300 cases) were responsible for 3 in 10 of the cancers diagnosed in both sexes.
- In women, the most common cancer types were breast cancer (which ranked first in 28 countries) and cervical cancer (in 19 countries).
- In men, the most common cancer type was prostate cancer (77 300 cases), followed by liver cancer (24 700 cases) and colorectal cancer (23 400 cases). Prostate cancer was the leading incident cancer in men in 40 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>1</sup> Bray F, Parkin DM, on behalf of the African Cancer Registry Network. Cancer in sub-Saharan Africa in 2020: a review of current estimates of the national burden, data gaps, and future needs. *Lancet Oncol*, Published online 9 May 2022; [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1470-2045\(22\)00270-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1470-2045(22)00270-4)

<sup>2</sup> Bray F, Laversanne M, Weiderpass E, Soerjomataram I (2021). The ever-increasing importance of cancer as a leading cause of premature death worldwide. *Cancer*. 127(16):3029–30. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cncr.33587> PMID:34086348

<sup>3</sup> WHO (2020). Global health estimates: life expectancy and leading causes of death and disability. <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mortality-and-global-health-estimates>



- The risk of a woman in sub-Saharan Africa developing cancer by age 75 years was 14.1%; breast cancer (4.1%) and cervical cancer (3.5%) were together responsible for half of this risk.
- For men, the corresponding cumulative incidence by age 75 years was lower (12.2%); prostate cancer was responsible for one third of this risk (4.2%).

### **Investing in locally produced data**

Even if cancer incidence rates were to remain unchanged, the cancer burden is expected to nearly double in sub-Saharan Africa during the next 20 years as a result of population growth and ageing, reaching 1.5 million new cases and 1 million deaths by 2040.

To overcome this mounting challenge, each country in sub-Saharan Africa needs to implement a cancer control programme as part of national health planning and to have at its disposal routine surveillance systems capable of monitoring progress in the delivery of specific interventions. The authors stress that local data from the cancer registries in the region – members of the African Cancer Registry Network ([AFCRN](#)) – are pivotal in improving outcomes and saving lives.

“A coordinated approach to implementing national strategies requires a sustainable investment in registries as the best-buy surveillance system that provides data on incidence and survival by cancer type and stage at diagnosis,” says Dr Freddie Bray, Head of the Cancer Surveillance Branch at IARC and the lead author of the report.

During the past decade, the IARC-led Global Initiative for Cancer Registry Development ([GICR](#)) has given new impetus to supporting existing cancer registries and aiding the establishment of new ones. In sub-Saharan Africa, the work of the GICR is done by members of the AFCRN, a consortium of all population-based cancer registries in the region that can meet defined criteria of quality, including progressively complete population coverage. The number of such registries in sub-Saharan Africa increased from 21 in 2013 to 35 (in 25 different countries) by the end of 2021.

### **For more information, please contact**

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