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Overcoming barriers to cancer screening in resource-constrained settings: Care4Afrique: a pilot cervical cancer screening programme in three African countries

Lyon, France, 3 February 2023 – To mark World Cancer Day, researchers from the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in collaboration with the Lalla Salma Foundation for Cancer Prevention and Treatment (Morocco) are today launching a new report¹ that provides solutions to overcome some of the common system-level barriers to implementation of cervical cancer screening, which are faced in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. This new publication summarizes the outcomes of the Care4Afrique pilot project,² which was initially implemented in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal in close collaboration with the ministries of health of those countries.

Cervical cancer is a critical public health concern worldwide, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. More than 85% of deaths from cervical cancer occur in low- and middle-income countries, which do not have adequate health system capacity to implement effective cervical cancer screening programmes with the model that is used in high-income countries.

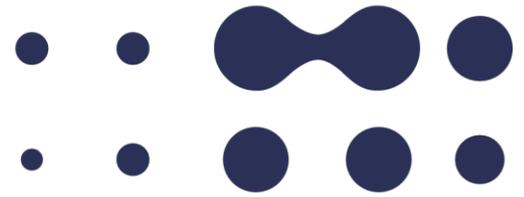
“Although the burden of cervical cancer is very high in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa, very little evidence is available on how best to integrate cervical cancer screening and treatment services, especially using new technologies such as thermal ablation, into routine primary health-care services,” says IARC scientist Dr Farida Selmouni, the coordinator of the project. “The Care4Afrique project provides an implementation model that other countries may emulate in order to remain aligned with the World Health Organization (WHO) strategy to eliminate cervical cancer as a public health problem globally.”

Project outcomes

The Care4Afrique pilot project demonstrated that implementation of cervical cancer screening by visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA) followed by immediate treatment of precancerous lesions with thermal ablation in primary health-care services is feasible in resource-constrained settings.

¹ IARC; Lalla Salma Foundation for Cancer Prevention and Treatment (2023). Implementation of a pilot cervical cancer screening programme integrated in routine primary health-care services in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal: report of a pilot project (Care4Afrique) in three African countries. Lyon, France: International Agency for Research on Cancer. Available from: <https://publications.iarc.fr/614>. Licence: CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO.

² Selmouni F, Sauvaget C, Dangbemy DP, Kpebo DDO, Dieng NM, Lucas E, et al. (2022). Lessons learnt from pilot cervical cancer screening and treatment programmes integrated to routine primary health care services in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal. *JCO Glob Oncol*. 8:e2200051. <https://doi.org/10.1200/go.22.00051> PMID:36070534



The project also showed that treatment with thermal ablation is safe and highly acceptable to women. The keys to the success of cervical cancer screening in any health setting, including in sub-Saharan Africa, are strong leadership, stakeholder engagement, appropriate coordination between the primary and secondary levels of health services, adequate investment in training and refresher training of service providers, and stringent quality assurance.

Another ambition of the pilot project was to build capacity within the public health-care system in the focus countries to deliver cervical cancer screening and treatment. Strong collaborations were established among multiple African countries to build capacity in the primary health-care facilities.

A team of master trainers was identified in each country and trained. These master trainers trained a large number of providers at the primary and secondary levels of care to deliver screening and treatment and also mentored them regularly.

Methodology

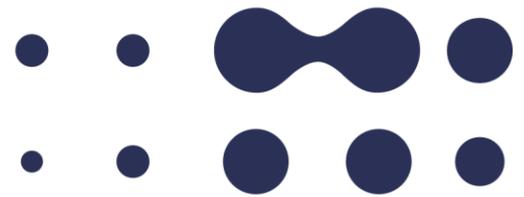
IARC in collaboration with the Lalla Salma Foundation for Cancer Prevention and Treatment (Morocco) launched the Care4Afrique pilot project in November 2017.

The project incorporated VIA as the screening test, thermal ablation as a novel technology to treat cervical precancers, and screen-and-treat as the management approach.

Between April 2018 and January 2021, a total of 16 530 women in the three focus countries were screened through the project. Overall, 8.1% of the women screened were VIA-positive, and among them, 0.2% of the women had lesions suspicious of cancer on VIA. A total of 60.7% of all VIA-positive women were eligible for thermal ablation; most of them (87.9%) received treatment on the same day as screening, and only 1.0% refused treatment.

“The implementation experience gained from this project will greatly help these countries to scale up cervical cancer screening and treatment to remain aligned with the WHO strategy to eliminate cervical cancer as a public health problem globally,” says Dr Partha Basu, Head of the IARC Early Detection, Prevention, and Infections Branch.

Initially, the pilot project focused on Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, and Senegal. The Care4Afrique project has now also been implemented in Cameroon, where screening of women has begun.



Note to the Editor

Cervical cancer is the fourth most common cancer type in women worldwide and is responsible for many premature deaths, especially in countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Every year, more than 300 000 women die from cervical cancer globally. More than 85% of the deaths from cervical cancer occur in low- and middle-income countries, which do not have adequate health-care resources to implement effective cervical cancer screening programmes.

The World Health Organization (WHO) announced a comprehensive [strategy to eliminate cervical cancer as a public health problem globally](#). To eliminate cervical cancer as a public health problem, all countries must reach and maintain an incidence rate of fewer than 4 new cases of cervical cancer per 100 000 women per year.

To reach the elimination target, every country must ensure that at least 70% of eligible women are screened with high-performance screening tests, at least 90% of women with cervical precancer are treated and 90% of women with invasive cervical cancer are managed, and at least 90% of girls are fully vaccinated against human papillomavirus (HPV) by age 15 years. Each country should meet these targets by 2030 to be on the path towards cervical cancer elimination by the end of this century.

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The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is part of the World Health Organization. Its mission is to coordinate and conduct research on the causes of human cancer, the mechanisms of carcinogenesis, and to develop scientific strategies for cancer control. The Agency is involved in both epidemiological and laboratory research and disseminates scientific information through publications, meetings, courses, and fellowships. If you wish your name to be removed from our press release emailing list, please write to com@iarc.fr.