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EDITORIAL

The importance of childhood cancer in Mexico

La importancia del cáncer infantil en México

*Roberto Rivera-Luna**

Oncology Department, Instituto Nacional de Pediatría, Mexico City, Mexico

The incidence of cancer at between 0 and 18 years of age has been showing a highly significant increase worldwide, especially in low- and middle-income countries. There are multiple factors that are mentioned to explain this rise. On one hand, in Mexico, thanks to the 1980s health campaigns for immunizations in the child population, institutional care of high-risk newborns, early use of antibiotics for childhood pneumonia, as well as early management of diarrheal conditions with oral hydration, have allowed neonatal and infant mortality to be decreased and, consequently, to have a larger population at preschool and school stages. With these public health measures, this population has stepped into the age of childhood cancer.

Before the 1980s, there were few national public institutions that could provide multidisciplinary care for children with cancer. It was not until the 1990s that state and federal governments began to develop a comprehensive care system for these children; however, equipment supply to the institutions has been, over the years, slow and economically difficult to comply with, both in terms of technical and human infrastructure.

With a public health structure uncoordinated with different health systems, indisputably the one with the largest population to be cared for is that of the Ministry of Health, with state, federal hospitals together with university and decentralized hospitals, which until 2018 constituted a total of 60 accredited institutions for comprehensive management of children with cancer, and which once contained more than one hospital in some States. Despite this effort, many institutions lack radiotherapy or neurosurgery services, and very few institutions have a stem cell transplant unit. Unfortunately, at present time there are only 31 accredited hospitals; this is due to a lack of planning, of new technical and human resources and, consequently, to a lack of recognition that childhood cancer is a national health problem.

All these limitations are based on a lack of knowledge by health authorities about the incidence of childhood cancer in Mexico, which is 151/million/year (2019), with a serious increase in acute leukemia cases, which currently account for 50% of all malignant diseases at between 0 and 18 years of age. Even being far from being a country with high economic resources, our incidence is similar to that of the United States.

The problem of childhood cancer in Mexico has characteristics that are not only epidemiological or financial: the lack of pediatric cancer-specialized nurses and doctors, the lack of tertiary care hospital institutions, and the highly important deficit in the supply of cancer drugs are determinant factors for mortality rates of 5.4/100,000/year (2021). These rates are well above those of several countries from the American continent, such as Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, USA and Canada.

It is necessary for Mexico to readopt childhood cancer as a national pediatric health problem, especially if we consider that since more than ten years ago, pediatric cancer, according to the General Directorate of Epidemiology, represents the second cause of death among children aged from 4 to 14 years. This is imperative, especially if we take into consideration that the survival-cure rate of this disease is 80% in countries similar to Mexico.

Correspondence:
*Roberto Rivera-Luna
E-mail: riveraluna@yahoo.com

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