

Tackling cervical cancer in South Omo Zone, Ethiopia



CERVICAL CANCER

Despite improvements in reducing the incidence of cervical cancer and its associated mortality globally, cervical cancer is not a disease of the past—it is a disease of the poor. Every 2 minutes a woman is lost to cervical cancer.¹ Most of these women live in low-income areas, where 90% of deaths from cervical cancer occur.² In Ethiopia, among all cancers related deaths in women, 17.5% were due to cervical cancer.³

CUAMM'S INTERVENTION

Doctors with Africa CUAMM, in partnership with the regional Health Bureau and the Federal Ministry of Health of Ethiopia (FMOH), is implementing **2 projects** in South Omo, supporting the **start-up of cervical cancer screening and treatment services**. The first project, supported by the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation (BMSF), lasts 3 years (Oct-2016/Sept-2019) and it is implemented in the woreda of Dasenech and Hamer and Jinka Town. It targets 7 health facilities (HF) for a catchment population of about 9,916 women (30-49 years). The second project, supported by the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development, lasts 1 year (Aug-2018/Jul-2019) and it is implemented in the woreda of South Ari and Male and in Jinka Town. It targets 7 HFs for a catchment population of about 10,176 women (30-49 years).

In both projects, main **activities** are:

- Establishment of the Cervical Cancer screening and treatment services. This is ensured by the provision of medical equipment, consumable, furniture, cleaning material, registers, and educational material to all the HFs involved;
- Training of health staff in Visual Inspection with Acetic Acid method (VIA) and Cryotherapy techniques;
- Screening and treatment of women accessing HFs;
- Awareness raising campaigns at community level;
- Community education/outreach activities (screening and treatment).

RESULTS

Table 1: Total # of women screened from October 2016 to December 2018 in both projects.

Screening and Treatment	
Total women screened	2,943
Total VIA positive	210 (7.1%)
Total treated with cryotherapy	206 (98%)
Suspicious Cancer cases identified and referred	31 (1.05%)

Table 2: Total # of outreach activities and # of staff trained

Training and Outreach Activities	
Outreach activities	197
Awareness campaigns	21
Trained health staff	50

BEST PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES

Considering the first project, the major challenge has been the initial resistance and poor acceptance of the services by the communities. Indeed, most of the population in the targeted woredas is pastoralist. However, thanks to several meetings organized with the community leaders and the local authorities, it was possible to break a breach into the cultural barrier. For the second project, instead, the main difficulties faced are the geographical barriers, indeed during the rainy season some villages in the area are inaccessible due to the roads' conditions.

For both projects the **community based approach** and the **combination of awareness/education sessions with outreach activities** are the **key to success**. Indeed, on the one hand, the education sessions organized at Health Post level and the activation of community groups contribute to raise awareness on cervical cancer which is especially important in areas where preventive services are often not considered a need. On the other hand, the possibility to get screened and treated immediately after the education sessions allows for women with reduced access to the HFs to receive care and for a better understanding and acceptance of the service. Indeed, women who undergo the screening can directly communicate to the others.

1 F.M. Knaul, N. M. Rodriguez, H. Arreola-Ornelas, J. R. Olson, 2019. *Cervical cancer: lessons learned from neglected tropical diseases*. [Pdf] Available at <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2214-109X%2818%2930533-3> [Accessed 14 February 2019].

2 WHO, 2019. *Cervical Cancer*. [Online] Available at <https://www.who.int/cancer/prevention/diagnosis-screening/cervical-cancer/en/> [Accessed 14 February 2019].

3 WHO, 2014. *Cancer Country Profile: Ethiopia*. [Pdf] Available at https://www.who.int/cancer/country-profiles/eth_en.pdf?ua=1 [Accessed 14 February 2019].