

Women with AIDS face cervical cancer threat

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According to a report issued last week by UNAIDS, access to antiretroviral therapy is beginning to reduce AIDS mortality worldwide. But Dr. Groesbeck Parham, gynecologic oncologist and Director of the Cervical Cancer Prevention Program at the Center for Infectious Disease Research in Zambia (CIDRZ) warns that women being treated for AIDS could end up dying of cervical cancer unless they have access to screening and treatment.

“We are saving women’s lives by treating them with antiretroviral therapy, but we could lose a high percentage of them to cervical cancer,” said Parham.

Parham and his team have tested more than 10,000 Zambian women in the largest cervical cancer screening program targeting HIV-infected women in the developing world. In a study published last year in the journal *Gynecologic Oncology*, he reported that 90 percent of HIV-infected women presenting for antiretroviral therapy also harbor cervical cell abnormalities, conditions that left untreated can develop into cervical cancer.

“Before having access to antiretroviral medications, women living in developing nations who had AIDS typically succumbed to it before they could develop cervical cancer,” said Parham.

Currently, 80 percent of new cases of cervical cancer and 80 percent of the annual deaths occur in women who live in developing countries. Few women in poor countries have access to cervical cancer screening or

treatment.

“As funds are allocated for HIV/AIDS care and treatment, we need to make sure that women’s other health issues are not swept under the carpet,” said Dr. Mulindi Mwanahamuntu, Co-Director of the CIDRZ Cervical Cancer Prevention Program.

In sub-Saharan Africa, cervical cancer is the most common female cancer and the most common cause of cancer-related death. When cervical lesions are discovered in pre-cancer stage the cure rates are high.

In the CIDRZ program, women are examined by nurses trained in a low-tech, low-cost screening protocol that allows them to identify precancerous or suspected cancer within minutes instead of waiting for results from a pap test. The women can then be treated immediately.

Source: CIDRZ Foundation

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