

Cancer treatment funds run out for Swazi patients

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(AP) -- Swaziland's government has run out of money to send its cancer patients to neighboring South Africa for treatment, and a spokeswoman said Thursday the tiny impoverished kingdom does not have any government hospitals that can provide chemotherapy or radiation therapy.

Some patients already have been forced to suspend their treatment because money has run out for them, said Zanele Nkambule, secretary of the Cancer Association of Swaziland.

"Once radiation or chemotherapy is started the patient has to finish all the six or eight cycles," she said. "If you break the cycle, when the disease recurs it will be more aggressive."

Health department officials said they could not say how many patients would be affected by the shortfall.

Department spokeswoman Zanele Dlamini said that Swazi government hospitals do not provide chemotherapy or [radiation therapy](#), and she did not know of any private hospitals in the kingdom that provided such services.

Nomsa Msibi, president of the Cancer Association of Swaziland, said all that doctors can do in Swaziland is take samples - even the specimens must go to South Africa to determine if there is [cancer](#).

The U.S. State Department on its website says that medical facilities are limited in Swaziland and that emergency medical capabilities, including ambulances, are almost nonexistent. It advises U.S. citizens to get care in neighboring countries for anything other than a minor procedure.

The wrenching news for [cancer patients](#) comes as Swaziland faces an [economic crisis](#) because of the worldwide recession and a drop in customs revenues.

The [financial woes](#) are also limiting the availability of medication in the country with the world's highest percentage of people living with HIV/AIDS. More than a quarter of Swazis between the ages of 15 and 49 are believed to be HIV positive.

Health Minister Benedict Xaba told parliament earlier this week that Swaziland's state hospitals only have about a two-month supply of [antiretroviral drugs](#). More than 60,000 Swazis depend on antiretroviral AIDS drugs, known as ARVs, distributed free at government hospitals.

Swaziland is seeking international loans to cope with its financial crisis, which also comes as a pro-democracy movement has gained some ground in recent months in Africa's last absolute monarchy. Activists have criticized King Mswati III for living lavishly while most Swazis live in poverty. He also is accused of harassing and jailing pro-democracy activists.

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