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Mountains of Challenge: Addressing the Rising Cancer Crisis in Himachal Pradesh

Abstract: Cancer has become a significant public health issue in Himachal Pradesh, India, with an unprecedented 800% increase in cases from 2013 to 2022. This surge, outpacing national trends, highlights the urgent need for targeted public health strategies. Factors such as improved diagnostic capabilities, changing lifestyles, and environmental influences contribute to this rise. Breast cancer in younger women, rising lung cancer cases, and cervical cancer prevalence, underscore the need for focused interventions. The state's unique geographical challenges, including difficult terrain and dispersed populations, complicate access to healthcare, leading to delayed diagnoses and treatments. Despite government initiatives to improve diagnostic and treatment facilities, significant gaps remain, particularly in remote areas. Increasing awareness, implementing comprehensive screening programs, and enhancing healthcare infrastructure are critical to addressing the cancer crisis in Himachal Pradesh. Lessons from this state can provide valuable insights for other regions facing similar challenges.

Keywords: Cancer incidence, Himachal Pradesh, healthcare infrastructure, breast cancer, public health strategies

INTRODUCTION

Cancer has emerged as a significant public health issue in Himachal Pradesh, India, over the past decade. This mountainous state, known for its serene landscapes and relatively low population density, has witnessed a dramatic rise in cancer cases, outpacing national trends. The alarming increase in cancer incidence has placed a considerable strain on the state's healthcare system and highlighted the urgent need for comprehensive public health strategies to address this growing problem.[1]

Himachal Pradesh, with its unique geographical and socio-economic characteristics, presents a distinct set of challenges in managing cancer as a public health issue. The state's rugged terrain and dispersed population make access to healthcare facilities difficult, particularly in remote and rural areas. This geographic isolation often results in delayed diagnosis and treatment, contributing to higher morbidity and mortality rates associated with cancer.[1]

The rise in cancer cases in Himachal Pradesh is not just a statistical anomaly but a reflection of broader epidemiological transitions. Factors such as changing lifestyles, increased life expectancy, and improved diagnostic capabilities have contributed to the higher detection rates of cancer. However, these advancements also underscore the need for a robust healthcare infrastructure capable of supporting early detection, effective treatment, and comprehensive care for cancer patients.[1]

Rising Incidence of Cancer

Alarming Growth Rates

Himachal Pradesh has seen an unprecedented 800% increase in cancer cases between 2013 and 2022. Data from the health department reveals that the number of registered cancer patients surged from 2,149 in 2013 to a concerning 17,212 in 2022, highlighting a significant public health challenge. The annual detection rate is approximately 8,500 cases, with many more potentially undiagnosed in remote areas.[1]

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This dramatic increase is attributed to several factors. Improved diagnostic facilities and heightened awareness in rural and remote areas have led to earlier detection of cases. However, the sheer magnitude of the increase suggests that other factors, such as environmental changes, lifestyle shifts, and possibly genetic predispositions, may also be contributing to this surge.

The state government, recognizing the severity of the situation, has emphasized the need for superior health facilities in every corner of the state. The state government has expressed commitment to addressing this issue, acknowledging that many cases may still be going undetected in the state's more secluded regions.

Comparison with National Trends

The growth rate of cancer cases in Himachal Pradesh is 2.2%, significantly higher than the national average of 0.6%. This disparity underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions in the state. The higher growth rate in Himachal Pradesh is particularly concerning when compared to national projections. According to the National Cancer Registry Programme (ICMR-NCRP), the estimated incidence of cancer cases in India is projected to increase from 14.61 lakhs in 2022 to 15.7 lakhs in 2025. Himachal Pradesh's growth rate outpaces even these national projections, indicating a more acute and rapidly evolving problem in the state.[2-4]

This comparison with national trends highlights the need for state-specific strategies to address the unique factors contributing to the higher cancer incidence in Himachal Pradesh. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding local risk factors, environmental conditions, and healthcare access issues that may be driving this disproportionate increase.

Risk Factors and Types of Cancer

Breast Cancer

Breast cancer has become notably prevalent in Himachal Pradesh, particularly among women aged 25 to 35. This trend is particularly alarming as it affects a younger demographic compared to global averages. A study conducted at the Regional Cancer Centre in Shimla identified several significant risk factors for breast cancer in the state.[5]

Risk factors include genetic predisposition, obesity, poor lifestyle choices, smoking, and alcohol consumption. The study also highlighted that late age at first childbirth, late menopause, high socioeconomic status, and age over 50 are significant risk factors in the Himachal Pradesh context.[4]

The prevalence of breast cancer in younger women in Himachal Pradesh raises concerns about potential environmental or lifestyle factors specific to the region. It also underscores the need for targeted awareness campaigns and screening programs for this age group.[5]

Lung Cancer

Lung cancer cases are also rising in Himachal Pradesh, with a significant percentage of patients presenting with advanced-stage disease. This trend is attributed to lifestyle factors and possibly environmental exposures. The high altitude and changing air quality in some parts of the state may contribute to this trend. It was observed that a majority of these patients presented with advanced-stage cancer, indicating delays in diagnosis and treatment.[1]

The rise in lung cancer cases points to the need for more robust tobacco control measures, increased awareness about the risks of smoking, and improved air quality monitoring and management in the state.

Cervical Cancer

Cervical cancer affects around 10% of women in Himachal Pradesh, with higher incidence rates reported in Chamba and Kullu districts. Long-term HPV infection is the primary cause of cervical cancer. The lack of region-specific studies indicates a need for focused research and intervention.

The higher incidence in certain districts suggests potential geographical or socio-economic factors influencing cervical cancer rates. It also highlights the need for targeted HPV vaccination programs and improved screening efforts in these areas.

The prevalence of cervical cancer in Himachal Pradesh aligns with global trends. According to the World Health Organization, cervical cancer was the eighth most commonly occurring cancer globally and the

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ninth leading cause of cancer death in 2022, accounting for 661,044 new cases and 348,186 deaths worldwide.[6]

Comparison with Other States

Cancer Incidence Rates

Himachal Pradesh ranks among the top states in India with the highest crude cancer incidence rates. The state has a crude incidence rate of 91.6 per 100,000 population, placing it seventh in the country. This rate is alarmingly high compared to other states with high cancer burdens, such as Kerala (135.3 per 100,000), Mizoram (121.7 per 100,000), Haryana (103.4 per 100,000), and Delhi (102.9 per 100,000).[2,7,8]

The high ranking of Himachal Pradesh in terms of cancer incidence rates is particularly concerning given its relatively small population and predominantly rural character. This suggests that factors beyond urbanization and industrialization may be contributing to the high cancer rates in the state.

The comparison with other states also highlights the need for cross-state collaboration and knowledge sharing in cancer prevention and control strategies. States with similar geographical or socio-economic characteristics might offer valuable insights into effective interventions.

Self-Reported Prevalence

According to the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India (LASI), the self-reported prevalence of diagnosed cancer in Himachal Pradesh is the highest in the country at 2.2%, compared to the national average of 0.6%. This high prevalence is particularly notable among the elderly population aged 60 and above.[4,9]

The high self-reported prevalence in Himachal Pradesh could be attributed to several factors, including improved awareness and diagnostic capabilities in the state. However, it also raises concerns about the actual burden of cancer, as self-reported data may not capture undiagnosed cases, especially in remote areas.

The higher prevalence among the elderly population aligns with global trends but also highlights the need for geriatric oncology services and age-specific cancer control strategies in Himachal Pradesh.

Healthcare Infrastructure and Challenges

Diagnostic and Treatment Facilities

The state has made strides in improving diagnostic facilities, which has contributed to the increased detection rates. However, critical gaps remain in the healthcare infrastructure for cancer diagnosis and treatment in Himachal Pradesh.

The Regional Cancer Centre at Indira Gandhi Medical College in Shimla, despite being the state's first cancer hospital, lacks PET scan facilities. This forces patients to seek diagnostic services elsewhere, often leading to delays in diagnosis and treatment initiation. The lack of advanced diagnostic tools in the state's primary cancer center underscores the need for significant investments in healthcare infrastructure.[1,7]

The geographical challenges of Himachal Pradesh further complicate access to cancer care. Many patients from remote areas face difficulties in reaching specialized cancer centers, leading to delayed diagnoses and treatment initiation. This highlights the need for decentralized cancer care services and mobile diagnostic units to reach underserved populations.

Government Initiatives

The Himachal Pradesh government is actively working to enhance cancer treatment infrastructure. Discussions are underway to establish a centrally funded National Cancer Institute in Hamirpur. This initiative, if realized, could significantly boost the state's capacity for cancer research, diagnosis, and treatment.

Additionally, the state has implemented various health insurance schemes to provide financial support for cancer treatment. These include the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana and the Himachal Health Care Scheme-HIMCARE. These schemes aim to reduce the financial burden of cancer treatment on patients and their families, potentially improving access to care and treatment outcomes.[1,3]

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However, the effectiveness of these initiatives in reaching the most vulnerable populations, particularly in remote areas, remains a challenge. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of these programs are necessary to ensure they are meeting the needs of cancer patients across the state.

Awareness and Screening Programs

Awareness Campaigns

The state government emphasizes the importance of cancer awareness and early detection. Initiatives include organizing workshops and awareness programs in collaboration with the National Cancer Institute. These campaigns aim to educate the public about cancer risk factors, symptoms, and the importance of regular screenings.

However, the effectiveness of these awareness campaigns in reaching remote and rural populations remains a challenge. Cultural barriers, low literacy rates in some areas, and limited access to media in remote regions may hinder the reach and impact of these awareness efforts.

Screening Efforts

Despite the efforts to raise awareness, screening rates for various cancers remain low in Himachal Pradesh. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), only 0.7% of women aged 15-49 have undergone cervical cancer screening, 0.4% for breast cancer, and 0.3% for oral cancer. These low figures highlight the need for more robust and accessible screening programs.[1,3,7]

The low screening rates are particularly concerning given the high incidence of breast and cervical cancers in the state. This discrepancy suggests that many cancers are being detected at later stages, potentially leading to poorer outcomes and higher mortality rates.

Improving screening rates will require a multi-faceted approach, including:

- Increasing the number of screening facilities, particularly in rural and remote areas
- Training healthcare workers in cancer screening techniques
- Addressing cultural barriers that may prevent people from seeking screening
- Implementing targeted screening programs for high-risk populations

CONCLUSION

Cancer poses a severe public health challenge in Himachal Pradesh, with rising incidence rates and significant healthcare infrastructure gaps. The state's unique geographical and socio-economic characteristics present both challenges and opportunities in addressing this growing problem.

While the state government has taken steps to address these issues, including improving diagnostic facilities and implementing health insurance schemes, more comprehensive efforts are needed. Increased awareness, early detection, and targeted interventions are crucial to mitigating the impact of cancer on the population of Himachal Pradesh.

Future strategies should focus on:

- Strengthening the healthcare infrastructure, particularly in remote areas
- Implementing comprehensive cancer screening programs
- Conducting region-specific research to understand local risk factors
- Developing targeted interventions for high-risk populations
- Enhancing cancer awareness and education programs
- Improving access to advanced diagnostic and treatment facilities

By addressing these areas, Himachal Pradesh can work towards reducing its cancer burden and improving outcomes for cancer patients across the state. The lessons learned from tackling this public health challenge in Himachal Pradesh could also provide valuable insights for other states in India facing similar issues.

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