

## Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai dies of cancer

Written by

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Sep. 27 (GIN) – With the death this week of celebrated Kenyan activist Wangari Maathai from ovarian cancer, the country’s dismal record on cancer care stands out in harsh relief.

Despite rising numbers of cancer cases over the past 10 years, the country has no program or budget line for addressing the disease, according to a policy brief prepared this year. New cures and other improvements in the developed world are “yet to be realized” in Kenya, wrote Dr. Alice Musibi, medical oncology research officer of Kenya’s famed medical research institute KEMRI in a report.

“Increasingly, younger Kenyans seem to be more affected by cancer, unlike in the past, when it was considered a disease of the old,” Musibi wrote.

“People think that cancer is a disease of the elderly, the rich, the north and the west, but by 2020, 70 per cent of all new cancer cases will be in the developing world,” said oncologist David Kerr in an interview with Reuters.

"If you take a country like Ghana - it has 25 million people and four oncologists," Kerr said. "In Sierra Leone, there are none." In Kenya, there are three medical oncologists, four radiation oncologists, two surgical oncologists, and two gynecologic oncologists for the whole population.

Cancer now numbers among the top 10 causes of mortality among Kenyans with cancer of the esophagus, prostate and Kaposi’s sarcoma most common among men and cervical, breast and esophageal cancer highest among women.

Currently, approximately 80,000 cases of cancer are diagnosed each year and eighteen thousand Kenyans die annually from cancer with only one public health facility providing radiotherapy services in the country, noted Dr. Ochiba M. Lukandu of the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation. Chemotherapy is available but limited.

Wangari, who was 71 at her untimely passing, was the first woman PhD in biological sciences in East Africa. She launched the Green Belt Movement to restore Kenya’s damaged ecosystem by planting trees dedicated to Kenya’s women leaders. “Africa, particularly African women, has lost a champion, a leader, an activist,” wrote President of Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

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"(She) was a mighty woman, " wrote Kerry Kennedy of the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice, "creative, fearless and full of love. We will miss her."