

Editorial: COVID-19 Pandemic, the Second Wave, and Provision of Cancer Services

Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (COVID-19) pandemic continues to have a massive effect on health worldwide, with 80.6 million cases and 1.76 million deaths reported so far. It has crippled the world economy, and major multinational companies have declared bankruptcies. In Pakistan, it has affected 471,000 people, with 9874 deaths reported. The second wave has not had an effect similar to what was seen during June 2020. On average, approximately 2700 cases are being reported daily, with roughly 60 people falling victim to this deadly virus every day. Testing capacity in the country has been increased, and almost 40,000 people are being tested every day for SARS-CoV-2 polymerase chain reaction (PCR). The numbers seem to have plateaued during the past 1 week. The overall positivity rate for Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital and Research Centre (SKMCH and RC) in Lahore and Peshawar has been around 15%. So far, we have had 124 and 24 employees testing positive at Lahore and Peshawar, respectively.

Cancer services at both the hospitals of SKMCH and RC have continued in full swing during the current period. Screening counters have been established at various entry points to the hospital, and outpatient services continue to follow a stringent attendant policy. Besides, almost all the follow-up appointments have been converted to telemedicine clinics. Chemotherapy and radiotherapy sessions are back to where they were during pre-COVID times. We have increased the day case surgeries, which now represent approximately 45% of the total surgical oncology numbers, which are also at the routine which was being followed in January 2020. It is ensured that all the patients except for those requiring emergent surgical procedures undergo pre-surgery PCR for SARS-CoV-2. A similar

rule is followed for those undergoing endoscopies. Personal protective equipment (PPE) guidelines, especially those applicable to various hospital procedures, are published and revised regularly by the infection control. This is in addition to the creation of a Stockpile for PPEs and essentials such as availability of oxygen and diagnostic reagents. Infection control does a daily hospital round, which has been divided into three zones (green, yellow and red) based on the risk of infection, to ensure PPE and compliance with other hospital rules related to COVID-19.

Diagnostic and imaging services continue to provide ever-expanding services at the main hospital and the offshoot diagnostic centres in Lahore. We have been conducting SARS-CoV-2 testing for all major airlines while at the same time continuing to provide home and drive through sampling in major cities of the country. The laboratory is performing approximately 800 PCRs daily on a completely automated Cobas 6800 analyser.

As part of the national effort to counter this deadly disease, SKMCH and RC has been involved in the national SARS-CoV-2 vaccine trial being conducted by the National Institute of Health. With the availability of COVID-19 vaccine in the first world, the effort of the Pakistan government to secure it and to ensure that those at the highest risk of contracting the virus is offered this first, SKMCH and RC has created a list of front line health care workers (HCW) involved in the COVID-19 effort and those cancer patients on active treatment so that these HCW and cancer patients (being most at risk) could be the first ones to be offered the vaccine. The list of front line HCW has also been uploaded on the government's national database created by the

National Command and Operation Centre. The government has indicated that the vaccine is likely to be available at the end of the first quarter of 2021.

All of the above and its compliance are monitored twice weekly by relevant stakeholders from both hospitals in a meeting headed by the chief executive officer of SKMCH and RC.

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