Childhood cancer’s enemy in the Philippines is called Doc Mae

Access to Healthcare

Every time “Doc” Mae tells parents their child has cancer, she makes a promise – one she has never broken. She promises the family she and her team at the Southern Philippines Medical Centre in Davao City will do their best. Of course, most doctors would offer those words. But for Philippine children with cancer, Doc Mae is perhaps their greatest hope. Too few treatment centers exist on the island of Mindanao. Doc Mae has made it her life’s work to change that.

In developed countries, a child diagnosed with cancer has an 80% chance of surviving. Survival rates in developing countries can be as low as 10%. Dr. Mae Dolendo, a pediatric oncologist in the Philippines, is committed to evening these odds for the children she treats, with support from World Child Cancer and Sandoz.

Seeking specialist medicine in the Philippines usually means a long journey. The country has over 7,100 islands, with a combined population of more than 100 million\(^1\). For the entire country, there are only about 40 pediatric oncologists, and many of them are in or near the capital city\(^2\). On the island of Mindanao, there are only three pediatric oncologists. This is where World Child Cancer is working to improve care of children with cancer. Doc Mae has set up cancer-care clinics across an entire island, bringing therapy closer to patients in need and improving diagnosis and survival rates for a nation’s children.

The odds of surviving childhood cancer in developing countries like the Philippines are significantly lower than in developed countries. Doc Mae has dedicated her life to changing this reality. Since she started her work as lead pediatric oncologist at the Southern Philippines Medical Center, survival rates have increased from 10% in 2004 to 50% currently.
Bon Bon is being treated by Doc Mae at the Southern Philippines Medical Center. He did not seek medical treatment for his advanced tumor until a very late stage. Doc Mae says this is common in the Philippines. Often in developing countries, childhood cancer is not diagnosed, or is diagnosed too late for effective treatment to take place.
Doc Mae treats childhood cancer in her own way: combining science with art. Her method is to care not only for the child, her patient, but also to support the family that surrounds the child. “We must never forget that the family is responsible for a lot of things for a child.”
This young mother and her baby, who has cancer, stand in the open garden of the House of Hope, a home-away-from-home for cancer patients and their families at the Southern Philippines Medical Centre in Davao City. Due to poverty, treatment abandonment is a tragic reality among Filipino children with cancer and their families. Parents decide not to treat their child’s cancer because they simply cannot afford it. House of Hope was created by Doc Mae to combat this challenge.
A three year old girl gives herself a bath in the early morning hours in the garden of the House of Hope. Since the House of Hope was opened to cancer patients like her and their families, there has been a significant improvement in the survival rate among children with cancer treated at the Southern Philippines Medical Centre. The number of families abandoning treatment has also significantly decreased.
“My hope is to have my child cured from cancer. Someday, I want to see her go to school and have a normal life growing up.” Scheharazade Del Rosario is 23 years old and mother to Precious Jewel, who has Sacrococcygeal Teratomal and is a patient of Doc Mae’s at the Southern Philippines Medical Centre.
Dr. Rojim heads the Palliative Care team at Southern Philippines Medical Center- Children's Cancer and Blood Diseases Unit, which covers Hospice Care and End of Life Care. He and the other palliative care doctors draw strength from each other by constantly reminding themselves of their purpose to support peaceful end of life care for children and families who have fought hard in the battle with cancer. The survival rate for children with cancer in developing countries is approximately 20%, while children in developed countries have an 80% chance of surviving cancer. Poverty and poor access to quality medical care are just two reasons why this is the case.
Elsie is a Quality Improvement and Patient Safety, Pediatric Oncology Staff Nurse at Southern Philippines Medical Center- Children's Cancer and Blood Diseases Unit. Her mission is “to give the best quality care to our patients, not just to add days to the remaining life, but more importantly, to add life to the remaining days.”
Joy waited to seek medical care until the cancerous tumor in her knee was so big she could hardly walk. As a result, her leg had to be amputated. During her treatment, Joy stayed for free at the House of Hope. Under Doc Mae’s care, she is now in remission and has many plans for her future.
Doc Mae’s medical practice goes beyond the patient to include the family. By recognizing the vital role of family members in the survival of children with cancer, Doc Mae has created a support system that addresses the realities of poverty and is making a difference. By valuing the entire patient ecosystem, she is evening the odds for children with cancer in the Philippines.

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