

Challenges with immunotherapy in Zambia

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Introduction

Immunotherapy has changed the scope of cancer treatment and amplified the field of tumor immunology which started way back in the time of Wiley Colley. Over the past years, several immune related strategies have become standard of care in cancer management. The use of these strategies relies strongly on effective laboratory service and consistent availability of immunotherapy drugs. Zambia has recorded quite a number of cases that require immunotherapy for optimal treatment. However, this has been hampered by not only the lack of laboratory capacity but also limited availability of immunotherapy drugs across the nation. We plan to evaluate and analyze the exact gaps hampering the adoption and delivery of cancer immunotherapy in Zambia.

Methods

A preliminary needs assessment of cancer immunotherapy was as done by reviewing some clinical cases referred to Cancer diseases hospital. Treatment recommendations stemming of various tumor multidisciplinary boards comprising various clinical specialties were also reviewed in line with global treatment guidelines. A further audit of local laboratory capacity to support cancer immunotherapy as well as the local pharmaceutical potential to supply immunotherapy drugs was done mostly telephonically.

Results

A significant number of cases were noted to have been recommended for cancer immunotherapy treatment. There were no laboratories that were able to do predicative markers for immunotherapy locally. However, a few private laboratories reported ability to do immunotherapy predicative marker tests through courier to other laboratories outside the country. Some private pharmacies confirmed ability to supply the immunotherapy drugs on special request.

Conclusion

Zambia does have a significant number of cases requiring immunotherapy treatment, however there is need to expand on the current laboratory and pharmaceutical capacity to effectively implement this modality. A comprehensive study on the exact gaps and cost benefit ratio has to be conducted specific to the Zambian setting.