

Louisville doctor battles cervical cancer in Haiti

Laura Ungar, The (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal 7:03 a.m. EST November 17, 2013

Dr. Robert Hilgers' goal is to create a network of clinics to screen women in the impoverished and earthquake-ravaged nation.



(Photo: Courtesy of Dr. Robert Hilgers)

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- The 38-year-old single mother of two came into Dr. Robert Hilgers' clinic office in Haiti in excruciating pain — and he could do nothing to save her.

She had incurable cervical cancer and had arrived at the clinic too late.

Even now, two years later, the memory haunts him.

"I felt hopeless, not only because I could not offer the patient what she needed, but ... because we did not have any painkillers outside of ordinary Tylenol," said Hilgers, a gynecological oncologist in Louisville who has volunteered in Haiti for years.

Such stories still are all too common in the impoverished and earthquake-ravaged Caribbean nation, where cervical cancer kills Haitian women at a rate 30 times higher than in the United States. Each year an estimated 1,500 women in the this nation of roughly 10 million die from the disease — more than from any other type of cancer.

It's why Hilgers has made it his mission to attack the disease, which is preventable and treatable if found early.

Hilgers founded the nonprofit Women's Global Cancer Alliance, which created a screening clinic in a hospital in Gros-Morne, Haiti, that has already treated 2,000 women and is raising money to open another, with hopes of creating a national network of clinics.

He is also working with international cancer organizations and the director of Kentucky's cancer registry to create Haiti's first registry so that health officials know where to direct resources.

"Cancer of the cervix is unique. It is the only cancer we can eliminate through screening," Hilgers said. "We can knock this out if we just have the right resources."

"Dr. Bob," as Hilgers is known, exudes an infectious passion that draws people in Kentucky, Haiti and elsewhere to the cause. Jo Ann Heppermann, who with her husband runs an equine-consulting firm, is among them; she helps raise money for the cause.

"He came to me at the end of (a Rotary Club) meeting, and I haven't been able to shake him since," said Heppermann, echoing others who cited Hilgers' persistence, drive and dedication as reasons for getting involved. "I believe we're at the beginning of the end of cervical cancer in Haiti."



Dr. Robert Hilgers of Louisville, shown during a recent trip to Haiti, is working with others toward creating a cancer registry for the nation. (Photo: Courtesy Dr. Robert Hilgers)

But some global health advocates said eliminating cervical cancer in Haiti will take a huge, sustained global effort beyond the fundraising effort that is just beginning in the Louisville region.

"It would need a bigger effort for sure," said Dr. Jim Smith, president of Health 4 Haiti in Colorado. "It would need a champion, like Sean Penn or Angelina Jolie."

But supporters say Hilgers' work is an important early step that will save many lives.

"He knows that for a very minimal investment we can do these screenings. We can do them safely. We can do them well," said Jane Younger, a nurse who chairs the cancer alliance council. "I'm absolutely convinced we can do this."

She said the need is great; "these are the moms and grandmas, the caregivers, of people in that nation."

"Women are the pillars who hold everything together," Hilgers said.

An enormous burden

Cervical cancer strikes hardest in impoverished regions and countries. Although there are no definitive statistics because Haiti lacks a cancer registry, global health officials estimate that the disease strikes Haitian women at the world's highest rate — 93 per 100,000. That's more than 12 times the U.S. rate.

In the United States, widespread Pap smear screening has reduced cervical cancer prevalence and deaths dramatically since the 1950s because it allows doctors to identify precancerous lesions and remove them before they turn into cancer.

Dr. Jean Ronald Cornely, director of the cancer program in the Haiti Ministry of Health, said the country has no large-scale screening program of any kind. Pap smears are a luxury in a nation where the average family lives on \$3 a day.

"These things we take for granted — we forget how many people are living without in so many other countries," Younger said.

Compounding the problem, experts said, is the fact that Haitian women are uneducated about the disease, so they don't recognize its symptoms or realize it is caused by the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus.

"A lot of these women are dying of cervical cancer, and they think it is caused by voodoo — that someone has put a curse on them," said Dr. Fritz Apollon of Florida, a retired obstetrician/gynecologist who chairs the board of the American Haitian Medical Association.

Preventive care is not part of the culture, experts said, and physicians are in short supply.

All of this means most cervical cancer victims are diagnosed after the disease has spread to the point that it requires intensive treatment — which is unavailable inside the country.

"In country, they have no radiation therapy at all (and limited chemotherapy). So that leaves surgery, and surgery doesn't take care of advanced cases," Smith said. "That pretty much sentences a woman to death."

Hilgers believes a network of clinics would go a long way toward stopping cervical cancer deaths.

At his clinic in Gros-Morne, instead of providing Pap smears, doctors screen with the so-called "see-and-treat" method, using vinegar to identify suspicious cervical lesions and then freezing them off during the same visit. It is quicker and cheaper than Pap smear screening and doesn't require a lab.

A report last year on a World Health Organization demonstration project in Africa concluded that the procedure is safe and effective in poor countries.

Hilgers and other cancer alliance leaders are now trying to raise \$25,000 to complete the second floor of a clinic run by Health 4 Haiti to create another see-and-treat screening center in Gonaives, one of the country's largest cities.

Poor women in Haiti are pitching in too, giving from their meager resources.

Jan Lewis, who lives in Ecuador and volunteers in Haiti, works with a group called "20 Women of Gonaives," helping them market handmade batik scarves. She said these women have chosen to give \$4 of the proceeds from each \$24 scarf toward the creation of the screening clinic.

Tracking the disease

Hilgers is also working with Kentucky Cancer Registry Director Tom Tucker and the France-based International Association of Cancer Registries on creating a cancer registry for Haiti.

Registries track the numbers of cancer cases, and also include information such as stage at diagnosis, types of treatment people receive and hardest-hit regions of the country.



Dr. Robert Hilgers, left, and Dr. Jim Smith unload medical supplies in Gonaives, Haiti. (Photo: Courtesy Dr. Robert Hilgers)

"If you don't have that surveillance system, you can't even see the problem," Tucker said. "If you don't have your eyes, you don't know where to direct your limited resources."

Kentucky's registry is one of the most respected in the United States, and Tucker is one of two North American representatives on the IACR. Tucker said Hilgers approached him, full of passion, about sharing his expertise and advising Haitian officials.

Tucker said the IACR is creating a Caribbean "hub," a community of scientists to help countries in the region create and refine registries.

That will be especially helpful in Haiti, Cornely said, since there are no pathologists outside the capital of Port-au-Prince. Tucker estimated that if all goes smoothly, Haiti should have a hospital-based registry in about a year, and a more useful population-based registry, which tracks all cases regardless of where they are treated, within five years.

Eventually, doctors hope to employ another weapon in the war against cancer in Haiti — vaccines for girls and young women against HPV strains that cause most cases of the disease.

"You get your foot in the door and save mothers," Heppermann said. "Then, you can eventually get to the daughters."

With a concerted effort — and ongoing global cooperation — Hilgers and others said it may be possible to someday eliminate the scourge of cervical cancer in Haiti.

"It's a small world, and we need to help each other when we can," Tucker said. "So that's what we're doing."

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