Cancer Awareness Forum - Feedback

CANCER IN THE CAMEROONIAN COMMUNITY IN THE UNITED STATES:
NOT A DEATH SENTENCE, BUT A VERDICT THAT CAN BE OVERTURNED.
- Asonglefac Nkemleke.

The statistics are not readily available (but what is known is scary); the incidence is increasing by the day (but the level of awareness) is either not there or not taken seriously. One source says between 35 and 50 Cameroonians in the Washington, D.C. Metro area alone lost their fights to various kinds of cancer during 2012. Touched by that statistic and conscious of the need to create awareness and mobilize resources to educate this community, the All Cameroonian Cultural and Development Foundation (ACCDF) partnered with a number of Cameroonian organizations in the area to organize a forum at which experts and other individuals concerned about cancer provided much-needed information on and about the existence of this malady.

At the strike of the bell, the first word was “cancer is not a death sentence.” It may be a condemnation to genetic and/or environmental causes, but cancer does not necessarily lead to instant or sure death. It is more like a verdict at the end of a very serious court case; and it is a verdict that can be overturned given the right approach. From one speaker to the other the reassuring words were: “you can beat it.” What is needed is early detection, a lot of will power, prayers, and full submission to the prescribed treatment.

Kicking off the discussion, Shufai Dr. Willibroad Shasha affirmed that cancer “is not a curse but a preventable, treatable, and curable disease” and that worldwide, there are seven most deadly types: lung, stomach, breast, cervical, liver, colorectal, and esophagus. Of these, he added, the most common in Sub-Saharan Africa in order of frequency are breast, cervical, prostrate, liver, lung, colon, esophagus, bladder, non-Hodgkins lymphoma, Kaposis sarcoma, and ovarian.

Addressing the causes of these cancers, Dr. Freddy Tita Nwa (an experienced FDA Scientific Reviewer of a variety of biologic and medical device products) pointed out that cancer “is a renegade system of cell growth inside the human body.” He added that changes in the human body that cause cancer cells to flourish are “genetic”, “but factors outside the body like the environment (chemicals, radiation, viruses, and tobacco) also play a role.”

Zeroing in on the Cameroonian community, Mrs. Illy Anne Nwabukwu (founder and president fo the African Women’s Cancer Awareness Association) said that Cameroonians have the highest percentile incidence of cancer in the Washington, D.C. metro area. She said that in 2012, more than 35 Cameroonians lost their fights to cancer; and there are 10 identified cases already in 2013.

Taking the cue, Mrs. Stella-Maris Adamu of the Michael and Muritia Patcha Foundation regretted that the “cancer mortality rates for immigrants in the United States have remained consistently higher than those for Americans.” While admitting that several factors contribute to this higher numbers, she saw “many cultural and socio-economic influences” as hindrances to access to the early screening and detection of the disease among the immigrant population.

Pursuing the discussion and narrowing in on those hindrances, Dr. Njwen Anyangwe-Ngute, a certified health promotion instructor with the American Cancer Society blamed the “lack of health insurance, differences in cultural understanding of cancer,
apprehension due to lack of knowledge and information, limited availability of free or low-cost care" as some of the challenges to Africans immigrants in submitting to early tests and detection of cancer. Other factors, she went on, include the status of some immigrants, their low socioeconomic status, language and the lack of support groups to ensure access.

Speaking as a cancer survivor, Mr. Emmanuel Ekumah urged any diagnosed case to remain confident and upbeat, continue with their regular routines, cooperate and submit to the medical teams treating their cases, and maintain healthy relationships in a healthy environment.

Dr. Nicoline Ambe (an author, a teacher, and a motivational speaker who flew in from California for the forum) admitted that while cancer "is a debilitating disease that affects both individuals, their families and their communities," there is a lot that both the individual and the community can do to combat it. She listed ten steps to personal wellness as potential palliatives to warding off the disease. These, she said, include personal fitness, good nutrition, spirituality, the individual’s mindset, passion, relationships, and emotional and mental stability of victims and their families, and their communities.

Again and again, speaker after speaker agreed that cancer is not a curse, that cancer is not a death sentence and that there is good news out there because several organizations are joining the fight.

The Cancer Awareness Roundtable which held at the Viking in Burtonsville was moderated by Shufai Dr. Willibroad Shasha and Miss Africa Pageant founder and CEO, Lady Kate Atabong Njeuma. It ended at the Plum Orchard Conference Center with a fundraising gala.