

The path forward for cervical cancer in South Sudan

January was Cervical Cancer Awareness Month, a critical moment to reflect on the state of cervical cancer prevention and care. In South Sudan, awareness of the disease is slowly growing, but it remains uneven and largely concentrated in urban areas, leaving many women and girls beyond the reach of lifesaving information and services.

Virtually all cervical cancer cases (over 99%) are linked to infection with high-risk types of human papillomavirus (HPV). The most important thing to know is that cervical cancer is one of the most preventable cancers. It develops slowly over many years, providing a crucial window of opportunity to detect and treat pre-cancerous changes before they turn into cancer.

Significant gaps continue to undermine progress. HPV vaccination has not yet been integrated into the country's routine immunization schedule. Screening options such as visual inspection with acetic acid (VIA) and Pap smears are limited in availability and largely confined to a small number of health facilities. Compounding these challenges is South Sudan's inadequate pathology and oncology capacity, which results in many women being diagnosed at advanced stages of the disease, when treatment is more complex, expensive, and often out of reach.

To reverse this trend, South Sudan must adopt a comprehensive, phased strategy aligned with the World Health Organization's 90–70–90 cervical cancer elimination targets, ensuring high HPV vaccination coverage, expanded screening, and timely access to treatment.^[1]

Priority actions should include introducing HPV vaccination into routine adolescent immunization programmes, with schools and community platforms, particularly faith-based and local leadership structures, playing a central role in reaching girls and sustaining community trust. At the same time, screening services must be expanded by training more healthcare providers in VIA and cryotherapy and integrating these services into primary health care and maternal health platforms.

Ultimately, progress will depend on strong political leadership and sustained financial investment. We are encouraged by positive steps such as the establishment of the Oncology Department within the Ministry of Health. This is a crucial step in the right direction. Without these, cervical and other cancers will continue to claim lives that could otherwise be saved.

With them, South Sudan can take decisive steps toward protecting women's health and moving closer to the elimination of cervical cancer.

Reference:

1. World Health Organization. Cervical Cancer Elimination Initiative. WHO. 2026. Geneva. <https://www.who.int/initiatives/cervical-cancer-elimination-initiative>

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