

A BCS Perspective- Cancer and Covid-19

**Ensuring Access to
Appropriate Care
through increased
Advocacy, Networking,
Navigation, and
Partnership with
Public and Private
Sectors**



**Belize Cancer Society
June 2020**



INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

The Corona Virus (Covid-19) has had a significant impact on livelihood and survival of Belizean Communities, Businesses, Civil Society Organizations, Individuals and Families affected by NCDs specifically Cancer.

This snapshot of the BCS operations, will describe and highlight all efforts taken by the BCS and its partners to ensure sustained access to cancer services and treatment for both adult and pediatric patients living with Cancer in Belize and abroad.

It will detail the multisectoral, multidisciplinary and multi-pronged approach taken by the BCS to ensure adequate support was given to those most affected during the pandemic.

The BCS worked to ensure access to appropriate care through increased advocacy, patient navigation, networking, and partnerships with public and private sectors.

Pediatric Patient Amirah Bradley completed last chemotherapy in May 2020 during COVID-19 pandemic.





Some of our Littlest Fighters!



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Access to Care

Prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic pediatric and adult patients affected by Cancer had been able to access free cancer care services from the BCS. These services include and are not limited to:

- Navigational and referral support for access to cancer care at public and private treatment facilities both locally and regionally. BCS facilitates referral in country to the Belize Cancer Center Dangriga, the Karl Heusner Memorial Hospital and Private Treatment Facilities as well as regional cancer centers located in Guatemala and Mexico.
- Sustained yearly education, sensitization, and screening campaigns for cervical cancer prevention with support from local partners the Belize Family Life Association and the Ministry of Health as well as international partners i.e, Healthy Caribbean Coalition, Australian Direct Aid, UNESCO, American Cancer Society. These campaigns focus on the most rural and vulnerable communities and ethnicities.
- Supporting diagnostic testing and reading cost for vulnerable and impoverished adults to ensure timely access to care, as impoverished patients tend to fall through the cracks of the health system.
- Supporting payments for in country medical procedures or hospital admission for pediatric patients.
- Yearly community awareness and outreach activities to marginalized and impoverished communities, at risk youths, religious secs, LGBTQ populations, schools, and businesses.
- Free HPV Testing and cervical and breast cancer screening.
- Facilitating payments for all pediatric patients accessing care in Mexico at O Horan Hospital in Merida and provides transportation allowance for the child to travel for care. Children who receive treatment in Guatemala are provided with a monthly allowance for travel and access to care in Guatemala City. This was made possible through funding from the Social Security Board; last tranche of \$100,000 BZD was donated in June 2019 to date a

balance of \$35,000 is left to support our pediatric patients.

- To date no funds have been received for adult care which is increasingly important as the number of patients needing access to radiation steadily increases. This is of urgent concern as many patients die due to the inability to access further care, especially radiation treatment which is not available in country and must be accessed in neighboring Mexico or Guatemala.
- Since January 2019, the BCS has facilitated and continues to support 45 pediatric patients, ranging from 16 months old to 16 years old. Since January 2019 we have had 64 adult patients ranging from 25yrs old – 86yrs old. Currently 18 children and 26 adults are still on active treatment.





Pre Covid-19 Operations

With the imminent threat of the corona virus looming over our nation Belize and the increasing number of cases in neighboring Mexico and Guatemala. The BCS recognized it had to step into action to ensure that the care of our littlest fighters and adult patients would be maintained if the borders were to be closed as an issue of National Security. BCS expediently:

- Contacted all patients receiving treatment out of the country and informed them of the date of the border closure and requirements for entering the country after this date.
- Contacted the pediatric treatment facility in Mexico and developed a tele medicine platform with The Dangriga Cancer Center to ensure chemotherapy medication would be available and continuation of care maintained for our littlest fighters.

- Contacted elderly patients and provided contact information regarding access to health facilities during the COVID lock down period. Elderly patients were provided with care packages which included 4 packs adult diapers, 1 tin ensure powder and 30-day face mask supply.
- Posted information and updates daily on social media to ensure patients had the most simplified information to care for themselves through the pandemic lock down, including a list of essential items and medication they should have and recommendations for food supply.

COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS DISEASE **WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE SIGNS & SYMPTOMS**

Signs and Symptoms

- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- Cough
- Difficulty breathing

The illness resembles pneumonia with most patients having fever and severe non-productive cough.

If you have any of these symptoms, contact your health care provider immediately at: **0800-MOH-CARE**

Orange Walk
614-8091
677-2839

Belmopan
634-2870
600-2544

San Ignacio
600-7506
621-6687

Toledo
614-1417
621-7619

Corozal
625-6667
660-1115

Belize City
615-7973
223-2722

Stann Creek
607-0133
634-8648

Independence
624-0839
600-8167

0-800-MOH-CARE @Belizehealth

COVID-19 PREPAREDNESS PLAN **NOTICE TO ALL NHI REGISTERED MEMBERS**

As part of the CoVid-19 Preparedness plan please note that NHI registered members with Chronic Conditions in Belize City, Southern and Northern Regions are advised to call their respective NHI Provider prior to arranging pickup of their pharmacy prescriptions.

Belize City	Phone Numbers
Metro PCP	225-6444
Belize Family Life Association PCP	225-6881
Belize Medical Associates PCP	227-6884
Belize Integral Health Center	227-672227/2724
Marian Roberts PCP	227-7176
Southern Region	
Emergy PCP	525-6402
Independencia PCP	525-2618
Parra Gomez PCP	725-2628
San Antonio PCP	678-983653-6088
Northern Region	
Central PCP	422-9859
San Mateo PCP	483-9814
Providence Medical Clinic	423-9211

NHI advises all members to avoid unnecessary visits to the clinic. For any health concerns please call your respective NHI Provider.

COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS DISEASE **WHAT OUR ELDERLY NEED TO KNOW**

Self-isolation: Guide for caregivers household members and close contacts

If you are caring for or living with someone who has the virus, you are considered a "close contact". The Ministry of Health will give you special instructions on how to monitor your own health and what to do when you start to feel sick. Be sure to tell them if you are a close contact of someone with COVID-19.

- 1 Wash your hands often**
Wash your hands with soap and water after each contact with the infected person.
Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.
- 2 Wear mask and gloves**
Wear a mask and gloves when you have contact with a person's saliva and other body fluids (eg, blood, sweat, saliva, vomit, and waste).
- 3 Dispose of mask and gloves after use**
Take the mask and gloves off right after you provide care and dispose of them in the waste basket lined with the plastic bag.
- 4 Limit the number of visitors in your home**
Only have visitors you must see and keep the visit short.
Keep elders and people with chronic medical conditions (e.g. diabetes, lung problems, and immunodeficiency) away from infected persons.
- 5 Avoid sharing household items**
Do not share dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, bedding or items with the person under investigation.
After use, these items should be washed with regular soap or detergent in warm water.
Do not share cigarettes.
- 6 Clean**
Clean your home with regular household cleaners especially regularly touched items (e.g. toilets, sink tap handles and door knobs).
- 7 Wash laundry thoroughly**
Clean your home with regular household cleaners especially regularly touched items (e.g. toilets, sink tap handles and door knobs).
- 8 Be careful when touching waste**
All waste can go into regular garbage bins.
Do not touch used tissues or hands when emptying receptacles.
Clean hands with soap and water after emptying waste.

0-800-MOH-CARE @Belizehealth

During Covid-19 Lock Down Operations

The issue of Cancer does not STOP simply because we are faced with an international crisis and the immediate threat of a deadly pandemic. Those needing care and support prior to the pandemic will still need it, plus others that will require support during the pandemic. The BCS was faced with many requests and challenges during this period, ranging from access to food, assistance with incontinence supplies to support home bound and palliative care patients, as movement were restricted but patients still needed access to care.

The Belize Cancer Society in collaboration with the Dangriga Cancer Center ensured every patient that walked through our doors or called for support got the assistance they needed and access to treatment in country.

Unfortunately, not all persons affected by cancer are under the guidance and care of the BCS and as a result a 25 yr old young woman was deferred access to treatment for the entire 2-month lock down period, due to lack of funding at another facility and now 1 month later presents to the BCS for support with an advanced sarcoma needing to be referred out of the country. The BCS is making every effort to support this family.

The BCS continues to work diligently to ensure that access to care is the same for all Belizeans regardless of ethnicity, economic, political, or religious status. It is a fact that not all of us will be able to access health care effectively, it largely depends on where we live, who we know and our financial ability to pay.

During the lockdown period:

- The BCS in coordination with the Dangriga Cancer Center continued to maintain scheduled appointments for patients. Stamped letters were provided by the Dangriga Cancer Center for patients to travel across district boundaries to access care at the center in Dangriga.
- Transportation allowance was provided to patients via direct bank transfer due to restriction on travelling and contact.
- The BCS lost 4 patients during the lockdown period, three adults and 1 child. Of keen significance was the support given by the BCS in getting a 10-year-old boy's body back in country to his family in southern Belize. BCS facilitated garnering permits and approval from the Ministry of Health, Director of Health Services, Chief Public Health Inspector, the Attorney General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Belize Agricultural Health Authority for the importation of the body into the country. BCS coordinated with the attending Hospital in Merida for the release of child's body to a Mexican funeral home who then transported the body to the Mexico-Belize border where we coordinated with a local undertaker who met them at the Border to handover the corpse and have it stored in a secure facility in the city for transportation the next day directly to the burial site in southern Belize.
- Provided support for six family of pediatric children in filling out documents for submission to the Ministry of Human Development for food pantry or unemployment consideration.
- BCS facilitated contact and submission of documents to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for a Belizean cancer patient seeking repatriation from Bahamas back to Belize as her Cancer was severely advanced. Unfortunately, this patient died before she could return home.
- BCS coordinated through telemedicine the first in-country intrathecal chemotherapy for our children. This was done with treating oncologist in Merida, Belize Cancer Center Dangriga, a local anesthesiologist and a private sector clinic located in Belize City. The procedure was successful on both first and second attempt in April and early June.

- BCS facilitated telemedicine guidance with the oncology team in Merida for a misdiagnosed pediatric patient in Belize who was given the wrong medication and as a result a definitive diagnosis could not be garnered, and further treatment could not be administered. BCS is in the process of gaining approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and related Ministries for this 4yr old child and parents to travel through this pandemic period to Mexico, as this is his only option for care.
- The BCS supported the Healthy Caribbean Coalition's regional initiative to highlight the issues facing persons living with NCDs during the Covid-19 period.



Highlighted Barriers to Care

Covid-19 continues to highlight many barriers that we face in ensuring holistic support for those affected by Cancer, especially during a pandemic. However, we must understand that patients face both physical and psychological barriers. Some of these identified barriers we have encountered and mitigated are:

- Transportation and geographic barriers to access care such as the geographic location of patient from treatment facility and availability of public or private transportation.
- Access to care for elderly and mobility impaired patients.
- Access to pain management for palliative end of life patients.
- Low income (economic status) access to affordable healthcare.
- Uninsured persons not on National Health Insurance or private insurance. There is a significant need for increased financial support for diagnostic testing and confirmation of cancer. Many people fall through the cracks of the health system and die due to lack of funding or the inability to pay for a diagnostic test.
- Long waiting time and delayed support for access to care is of keen importance as many persons are left dangling with results they do not understand, for extended periods of time before they are able to access a medical professional.
- Cultural and religious barriers due to cultural practices and customs as well as religious indoctrination.
- Mental Health issues. Many patients both pediatric and adult with a cancer diagnosis sometime exhibit severe anxiety and confusion which may result in an altered state of thinking and acting for a prolonged period of time, however we must not discard these persons but intensify efforts to access the supportive care needed to ensure access to cancer care for them. Covid- 19 has significantly increased our requests for counselling and therapy support and many of our patients felt extremely overwhelmed. BCS collaborated with the Belize Family Life Association who provided us with a cell number to be shared with our patient who may be feeling stressed at the time. This was extremely important for the BCS to get more supportive care in this area for our patients.



Continuation of Care- The Way Forward

The BCS will continue to vigilantly maximize every opportunity to educate, advocate, and intensify our lobbying efforts on behalf of those we serve. In preparation for re-opening of the BCS Headquarters, the following preventative strategies were employed:

- Wash hand basins have been installed at both entrances for the BCS.

- Hand sanitizers have been placed in the reception and office areas.
- All pediatric patients and parents have been provided with reusable and disposable face masks.
- Any person entering the BCS is required to sanitize and wear mask before contact.
- Social distancing markers have been installed.
- Staff members have been given daily reusable branded face masks.
- A Thermal Thermometer will be procured to test temperature upon allowance into the BCS office.

To ensure the viability and longevity of the Society and the services we offer, mitigating strategies had to be adapted for the next six-month to reduce expenditure and ensure the long-term survival of the society. These include:

- Staff member salary reduction with reduced in office work hours. Office Secretary is in office 5 days a week and Administrator in office 2-3 day per week.
- No printing will be done of patient documents, only in extreme cases. Patient files will be uploaded digitally.
- No AC use is allowed in the office area. Fans have been procured.
- No community outreach, training, educational campaigns, or sessions unless funded by the Government of Belize, local or international partners.

This COVID period has highlighted the strength of the BCS and its service delivery capacity to the Belizean people. It has afforded the BCS the opportunity to utilize its telemedicine platform. This platform will continue to support targeted health guidance for the continued care of our children in country during this pandemic. As a purpose driven organization, we will continue to collectively strive to ensure access to quality, affordable, available, and effective cancer care services for those we serve.