GlobalRT: building a new radiotherapy community

“When a woman gets cancer, it’s not just a patient—it’s a family”. These powerful words of Tatiana Vidaurre, in a film entitled Veronica: a Peruvian Story of Cancer and Health, highlight the urgent need for global access to radiotherapy and other optimal cancer care. The film introduces us to Veronica, a young mother with cancer, receiving radiation treatment in Lima. Through the eyes of Veronica and Vidaurre, director of the National Cancer Institute in Peru, we see how the context, the person, and the available technologies all shape the experience of cancer.

Veronica’s story can be watched on the newly established GlobalRT website. GlobalRT is an online community created to advocate for global access to radiotherapy, and to connect patients, providers, and policymakers who want to improve global cancer care. The website was created by The Young Leaders Program of the Global Task Force on Radiotherapy for Cancer Control (GTFRCC) under the leadership of Mary Gospodarowicz. The GTFRCC has been set up to defy unsubstantiated assumptions that radiotherapy is too costly and not feasible in countries of low and middle income.

Disparities in access to effective cancer treatment have become a pressing global health priority. The urgency of this problem is amplified by the projected 54% increase in global cancer incidence by 2030, with the steepest rise in countries of low and middle income. Radiotherapy is indicated in the treatment of roughly half of all cancer patients in high-income countries, and in an even greater proportion in countries of low and middle income, where advanced presentations of cancer are more common. However, as data from the International Atomic Energy Agency shows, radiotherapy is still completely unavailable in 55 countries in the world and is scarce or inequitably distributed in many others.

The GTFRCC is a notably international, transdisciplinary, and cross-generational initiative that will produce a report that quantifies the investment needed to provide equitable access to radiotherapy globally. The GTFRCC has used a so-called diagonal approach to strengthening health systems, taking into account both the vertical cancer treatment system and the horizontal system that includes health infrastructure, financing, and community engagement. The success of the GTFRCC in accomplishing a change in global health practice of this magnitude will require transformational leadership, and ongoing iterative learning and collaboration across disciplines, sectors, and organisations.

The Young Leaders Program within the GTFRCC is an interdisciplinary team of residents, fellows, and faculty in the early stages of their career who have come forward to contribute to the success of this enterprise. Their participation in the Young Leaders Program facilitates networking, dialogue, and knowledge sharing between members of the GTFRCC. This structure has allowed this new global generation of radiotherapy experts to become strongly connected through their online presence. They are deeply committed to making radiotherapy universally available: the Young Leaders Program will ensure that the long-term goals of the GTFRCC are accomplished.

The young leaders are also key contributors to the GTFRCC working groups, participating in framework development and providing results that will be used in the GTFRCC report. Their involvement provides them with a unique opportunity to receive valuable mentorship from leaders in global health and cancer care. Mentors are particularly important in the field of global health oncology in which the career paths are multiple and not yet well defined.

The GTFRCC perspective on radiotherapy is much broader than that which is typically included in training programmes’ curricula. These curricula often include little or no attention to national or global access, nor to quality control in cancer care. By learning within the microcosm of the GTFRCC, principles can be derived that will allow knowledge translation, social responsibility, and global health to become part of mainstream curricula.

Although set in Peru, the images in the film about Vidaurre and Veronica should resonate with the experience of all patients and health-care providers who participate in cancer treatment. Highlighting this human dimension of cancer care can remind us that making radiotherapy universally available is ultimately about improving the lives of patients with cancer throughout the world. The Young Leaders Program could be one step towards ensuring that mutual learning and collaboration across continents and generations become part of the culture of cancer care and medicine.

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