Introduction

Of the 9 million people worldwide diagnosed with cancer in 2017, more than 60% live in Africa, Asia, or Central and South America. These regions also account for about 70% of the world’s cancer-related deaths (Figure 1). Uterine cervical cancer (UCC) is the fourth most common cancer worldwide, and the second cause of cancer-related death. Almost 90% of UCC and UCC-related deaths occur in low-income countries, mostly affecting young women in critical socio-economic conditions [1].

UCC is a preventable disease, and strategies for its primary (protected intercourse, HPV vaccination) and secondary prevention (detection and treatment of precancerous lesions) consistently result in lower rates of UCC incidence and related deaths. Many (often concomitant) unfavorable conditions hinder the extensive implementation of secondary prevention programs for low-income populations. Cost is not the only issue. Other major “adverse situations” are fragile public healthcare networks (and the difficulty of establishing efficient links between diagnostic and therapeutic actions), poor connectivity (both logistic and digital), and the lack of educational projects. Running effective UCC screening programs also entails removing cultural and other barriers (the lack of information about UCC and Pap smears, negative attitudes to screening tests, etc.), which may interfere with women’s chances of being tested [2-5].

In high-income countries, joint efforts by public and private healthcare networks usually do the operational groundwork needed to run oncological screening programs successfully. In
UCC secondary prevention, in particular, excellent results have been achieved by combining Pap smears with colposcopy [6]. Such favorable conditions are often unavailable in low-income countries, however. No established UCC prevention programs (be the primary or secondary) are currently running in Eritrea [7]. This manuscript describes an educational project that aimed to pave the way to locally-run screening programs for UCC secondary prevention in Eritrea [8].

The geopolitical landscape and early action undertaken in 2013–2017

- The geopolitical landscape

Eritrea is a sub-Saharan country (land area: 101,000 km²) with a population of five million (51% female). The median age of the resident population is 18.9 years, with a fertility rate of 4.32. The Eritrean population density is 50 per km², and about one in three Eritreans live in urban areas. At the time of writing (2017), the country’s annual per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was almost 1000 USD.

No reliable epidemiological information is available on the incidence of UCC in Eritrea [7]. In sub-Saharan Africa, 34.8 per 100,000 women are diagnosed with UCC each year, and 22.5 per 100,000 die of this disease [9].

The project, teaching timetable, and available resources

- The project

In 2013, a team of Italian specialists (gynecologists, pathologists, and experienced cyto–screeners) submitted a project to the Eritrean Ministry of Health (MRS. Amina Nurhussein) that proposed to establish a national UCC secondary prevention initiative (Figure 2). The first step in the project involved training local technicians to conduct Pap smear assessments. This step was considered crucial to the subsequent establishment of a screening-based secondary prevention program.

- Teaching program management and timetable (years 2013–2014)

Before starting the training activities at the Asmara Orotta Hospital, the gynecologist (KM) acting as the Eritrean promoter of the project spent 2 months in charge of the UCC screening activities at the Gynecology Unit at Padova University Hospital in Italy. During this period, he also attended a course on colposcopy organized by the Italian Society of Colposcopy and Cervical Pathology.

A structured academic course organized by the University of Padova was then held in Asmara. The course was structured and formally recognized by the University of Padova (Decree of the Rector of the University of Padova: July/22/2013). The teaching team consisted of 7 Italian specialists (2 cyto–screeners, 3 gynecologists, and 2 pathologists). An Eritrean gynecologist (KM) appointed by the Eritrean Minister of Public Heath was in charge of local organizational matters.

Twelve Eritrean nurses, midwives, and laboratory technicians, selected from among the healthcare personnel at the Orotta National Referral Hospital in Asmara, attended the residential course, which was held at the Orotta National Referral Hospital. The course included: (a) formal lectures to provide a basic theoretical knowledge of the pathology of the female genital tract; and (b) microscopy tutorials to provide the basic diagnostic criteria to apply in Pap smear assessments.

- Formal lectures

The following topics were addressed in 8 days (70 hours) of intensive teaching activity: i) anatomy of the female genital tract; ii) physiopathology and basic pathology of the female genital tract, iii) diagnostic cytopathology/microbiology techniques; iv) histological-cytological correlations; and v) diagnostic cytology laboratory management.

- Diagnostic Laboratory of Pap smears assessment

In all, 180 hours of training on real Pap smear slides were delivered as practical microscopy sessions. Informal group tuition with one-to-one discussion of cases at a multi-vision microscope was also included.

After completing these teaching activities, the students were shown a series of 75 pre-assessed Pap–smears representative of normal and pathological, neoplastic and non–neoplastic conditions (all obtained using conventional thick layer methods). They were also given a pre–set diagnostic frame (Figure 3), consisting of a checklist of the most significant cytological changes potentially encountered in a Pap smear.
assessment. This teaching set of cytology slides was circulated among all the students over a period of two months, and the students were asked to complete the diagnostic checklist on the slides in order to test their diagnostic skills. After they had assessed the Pap-smears, new sessions of informal group tuition were conducted to critically review each student’s diagnostic performance (one-to-one discussion of cases at a multi-vision microscope). A final test of their performance was based on the discussion of a series of 50 newly selected cases. Eleven students passed the proficiency test (November 2014), three of them also with a special mention. The graduation ceremony was held at the Orotta National Referral Hospital, involving the General Manager of the Orotta Hospital, the Dean of the School of Medicine of the Asmara University, the Director of the Health care National Office and the teaching team.

- Human resources and logistics, technical instruments, and teaching material

The training initiative required both local and Italian resources.

The Eritrean Government provided:
- human resources: dedicated personnel from the Orotta National Referral Hospital in Asmara;
- facilities/instruments: classroom and microscopes.

The Italian team provided:
- the teaching project as formally recognized by the Padova University (including free registration, formal certifications of attendance and graduation);
- facilities/instruments: teaching material, including cytology slides, books, and digital media (CD-ROMs).

The Italian team lived in Asmara for a total period of 160 person-days. All the teaching activities were conducted on a voluntary basis (as part of the Padova University institutional mission).

The first pilot project (Pilot-I: 2014-2016): tutored training

To consolidate the diagnostic skills gained by the Eritrean graduate cyto-screeners, a new intervention was planned to explore the feasibility of setting up a Pap smear clinic at the Orotta National Referral Hospital in Asmara. The goal of this pilot scheme (Figure 2) was to collect at least 2000 Pap-smear samples from outpatients at the hospital.

The project involved: i) setting up a colposcopy clinic and a cytology laboratory at the Orotta hospital; ii) monitoring, in the real life, how the graduated technicians could deal with a Pap smears clinic (quality, identification, and assessment of the cytological samples); iii) establishing structured clinical pathways for women revealing precancerous lesions or cancer.

The project was run under the supervisions of a local gynecologist (KM) between 2016 and 2017. All cytological samples had to be obtained, handled technically, and examined microscopically by Eritrean nurses or midwives. The Italian team assessed the technical adequacy of the specimens obtained.

A total of 2,042 women were enrolled. The women’s distribution by age is shown in figure 4. The results of the cytology according to the Bethesda system are shown in table 1, which also shows the mean age (and range) of the women in each of the diagnostic categories considered [10].

Among the 2,042, in 50 cases (2.45%) the slides were incorrectly identified or lost and in 198 cases (9.68%) the quality of Pap-smear did not allow any consistent cytology assessment.

Beyond the above-mentioned weaknesses, the results demonstrate that the educational initiative had succeeded in producing a local task force of cyto-screeners capable of managing the diagnostic phase of the UCC secondary prevention strategy efficiently. This was an important step towards ensuring the feasibility of a UCC prevention project.

Major weaknesses emerged in this phase, however, relating particularly to the difficulty of establishing a comprehensive secondary prevention program that could encompass both the initial diagnostic assessment of the neoplastic lesions and the subsequent therapeutic steps.

The second pilot project (Pilot-II: 2017-2018): real-life testing

To preserve the professional competence gained by the Eritrean technicians, and improve the operational link between the diagnostic and any necessary therapeutic steps, a Pilot–II project was developed and is still underway (Figure 2).

The aims of this Pilot–II initiative are:

- to monitor the quality of the cytology samples and the laboratory’s functional organization (including its technical performance);
The goal of Pilot-II is thus to collect at least 5,000 Pap-smears, half of them from patients admitted to the Orotta Hospital in Asmara, and the other half from women recruited from the population of Asmara. The project is still ongoing, and should be concluded by the end of 2018. The whole Pilot-II project is under the responsibility of Eritrean physicians and cyto-screeners, with the Italian team only monitoring the activities and serving in an advisory role (where needed).

Conclusions

Before the extensive implementation of screening programs, the UCC-related mortality rates were much the same in high- and low-income countries. This is no longer the case, however, now that the incidence and mortality rates for UCC in Europe and North America have been drastically lowered. It is generally acknowledged that we have to thank cervical cytology (Pap-smear) combined with colposcopy for the significant improvements made in this setting [11,12].

The results emerging from this Eritrean experience suggest a high prevalence of UCC in the population of Asmara, although no dependable information has been obtained as yet on the UCC incidence in Eritrea as a whole. The only (albeit weak) information potentially comparable with other African experiences concerns the association between an older mean age of the women screened and an increasing severity of the cases of cytologically identified cervical disease.

As for the educational effort, our initiative demonstrates that an intensive training program can produce efficient cyto-screeners capable of covering all the diagnostic steps of a Pap smear procedure successfully [13].

Secondary prevention strategies offer the opportunity to lower the incidence of UCC in developing countries too, even though certain practical issues may hinder the broad implementation of screening programs [14]. In 2015, a USA task force asked to design cancer prevention strategies for developing countries identified two major lines of intervention for preventing UCC: i) preventing HPV infection by making vaccines more readily available; and ii) implementing screening methods “more compatible than Pap smear” with the resources available in developing countries [15].

Vaccinating against HPV is currently the most efficient strategy for eradicating the main causative agent behind UCC, but the cost of national vaccination campaigns seems to be hardly compatible with the resources available in some areas.

As concerns secondary prevention strategies, this Eritrean experience demonstrated – despite significant weaknesses (related largely to shortcomings of the health system infrastructure) – that most of the obstacles are potentially manageable. On balance, the “cons” of “Pap testing” are largely counteracted by two significant “pros”, i.e. low cost and the availability of local human resources [16–19].

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