

Sokhna Ndiaye

Improving psychosocial support in paediatric oncology

Spotlight on supportive care

Background

Sokhna Ndiaye is a psychotherapist, who trained in the United States before returning to her birthplace of Senegal to work in both psychiatric and clinical settings. Currently, she manages the Psychological Support Programme in the Paediatric Oncology Unit at University Hospital Aristide Le Dantec.



The support programme is the only one of its kind in Senegal and neighbouring countries, and as a result families can travel up to 200 kilometres to receive the care offered there. In 2015, Sokhna Ndiaye completed a UICC fellowship in the United States. She visited three facilities to grow her knowledge about paediatric psycho-oncology through shadowing a number of health workers for multiple hours to multiple days.

Today, Sokhna Ndiaye integrates psycho-support in cancer treatment and emphasises the importance of seeing patients and their families as people. She centres her work on facilitation, training and individual care. Sokhna Ndiaye trains nurses and staff to be aware of the psychosocial aspects of paediatric oncology. She provides individual counselling to children and holds therapeutic groups for parents, staff and children to facilitate discussion and the transfer of knowledge between all those involved.

A multi-sited fellowship experience

During Sokhna Ndiaye's fellowship visit, she visited three different host organisations to learn from supervisors she had connected with during

International Psycho-Oncology Society (IPOS) and International Society of Paediatric Oncology (SIOP) meetings. These supervisors were Dr Andrea Patenaude of Harvard Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Boston, Dr Jimmie Holland of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, and Dr Lori Wiener of the National Cancer Institute.

During her fellowship, she learned about psychosocial programmes, collaborations, alternative medicine in clinical units, and bereavement care. Beyond the many applicable skills, she said that "what has changed me the most are the people I've met, their stamina and work ethic, much more than the techniques". She emphasised the importance of networking and managing these relationships.

Sokhna Ndiaye maintained great relationships with her supervisors and believes that "without mentorship, the field would not keep blooming". It is through mentorship that those in the field inspire newcomers, leave a legacy behind, and continue to grow important knowledge for the cancer community. To support her belief, she gives back to the mentorship community by being a UICC mentor and host supervisor herself.

Adapting to low-resource settings

Upon her return to Senegal, Sokhna Ndiaye found that some of what she learned could not be directly implemented in Senegal due to different available human and technical resources than in the United States. In response, Sokhna Ndiaye used her creativity to adapt what she learned from the fellowship experience to make it applicable and relevant to cancer care in Senegal.

For example, there are an insufficient number of psychologists in Senegal, making the therapist-to-patient ratio small. Sokhna Ndiaye acknowledged that, in a setting where there are limited therapists, there is little immediate benefit to training single psycho-oncologists. Given that restraint, she proposes training the doctors themselves – equipping the limited workforce with the knowledge they need to offer the best services that they can. Additionally, she included the need for all health workers already involved in oncology to be trained in the psychosocial aspects of cancer in Senegal's national cancer control plan.

Treatment for All: Supportive care

Sokhna Ndiaye exemplifies the supportive care pillar of the Treatment for All campaign. Her work with cancer patients, families and health care providers is a comprehensive approach that enables her to reach many areas of supportive care. Sokhna Ndiaye's passion for helping others is seen through her commitment to the cancer community, learning from and teaching others.

"I am a strong advocate for sharing practices. We don't all need to go through trial and error or reinvent the wheel. However, it is important to adapt the knowledge acquired to the realities of our low resource settings for our skills to be useful. I have personally very much benefited from my UICC fellowship in the US. So much so that I have encouraged and helped my colleagues in Senegal apply for a UICC fellowship themselves and already one was successful. Currently, I am supporting a colleague who lives in Cameroun to apply too. Two years after my return from my fellowship, I have hosted a fellowship candidate from Rwanda. That is what I call knowledge transfer; of which I am a strong advocate."