



## Education empowers women in fight against cancer

*Prevention and early diagnosis key to reduce mortality rate*

Cancer is set to become the leading cause of death in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with the [International Agency for Research on Cancer \(IARC\)](#) warning that one in six women may be at risk of developing cancer during their lifetime. While high-income countries record more incidences of cancer, they currently have far better recovery rates. The world's cancer mortality rates are much higher in low- to middle income countries where a staggering 70% of the global cancer deaths take place.

According to medical oncologist, Dr Keo Tabane, a member of [Icon Oncology](#), South Africa's largest network of private oncologists, one of the main reasons for this high mortality rate can be ascribed to the fact that cancer is often diagnosed at an advanced stage in poorer countries. "We have such a striking disparity between our upper and lower income communities," she says, "Different access to information; as well as to preventative, screening and treatment options sadly results in different outcomes along the entrenched socio-economic fault-lines in our society."

With longer life expectancy and lifestyles changes amongst lower-income populations, cancer rates are expected to rise. When it comes to cancer, time is of the essence. Women in lower income communities, often the family's primary caregivers and breadwinners, must be empowered by increased cancer awareness so that they can play an active role in cancer screening and hopefully prevention.

The top five cancers affecting women in South Africa are breast, cervical, colorectal, uterine and lung cancer (National Cancer Register 2014), with breast cancer the most common cancer in women of all races. At present 1 in every 27 local women could develop breast cancer. With early diagnosis and swift treatment, most women can survive it.

There are several contributing factors that lead to an advanced cancer diagnosis, in poorer communities, including:

- A critical delay between the first recognition of a symptom and the visit to a healthcare provider
- An overburdened public health system that results in long waiting periods between a patient's first visit to a healthcare practitioner and the eventual diagnosis
- Socio-economic factors such as lack of funds to travel to a public healthcare facility; not being able to afford hours away from wage-earning work and lack of child care
- Lower education levels and less cancer awareness compared women from more affluent communities.

Women with higher education levels are more likely to consider that their initial symptoms may be cancer. They generally have quicker, smoother journeys to diagnosis. This means that they have more opportunity to recognise potential cancer and access healthcare in the earlier stages of their cancer which can then afford them better outcomes. This link reveals how important it is that our healthcare system prioritises cancer awareness education and healthcare access for South African women in disadvantaged communities," explains Dr Tabane.



For Icon Oncology, the rising prevalence of cancer and its impact on the health of women signals the need for greater public-private partnerships. By pioneering a patient-centred value-based care (VBC) model, the network of specialists promotes a cost-effective, outcomes-based cancer care approach. This will feed into community-based projects aimed at improving cancer treatment, both curative and palliative.

“What we also need to see is enhanced communications about women’s health, cancer awareness and screening,” says Dr Tabane. “Opening up communication is essential. Women know their bodies, but feeling disempowered, shy or fearful can have devastating effects on their health. For both health professionals and patients, cancer prevention is the best defence. Openly sharing knowledge and supporting healthy lifestyles empower women to take charge of their health journey.”

### **Dr Tabane’s top health tips**

- Eat a healthy diet, rich in grains, vegetables and fruit. devoid of processed food.
- Exercise regularly.
- Maintain a healthy weight – obesity is linked to some cancers.
- Avoid all tobacco products including electronic cigarettes or vaping devices.
- Limit or avoid alcohol.
- Get regular health check-ups and screenings available at primary healthcare clinics across the country.
- Conduct regular breast self-examinations – ask your family planning or healthcare provider to show you how.
- Cervical cancer is preventable; ensure that girls in your family get the HPV vaccination which will protect them from developing cervical cancer later in life.
- If you notice persistent symptoms, make sure you visit a healthcare practitioner for early investigation.
- Sleep - lack of sleep negatively affects the immune system.

### **Media profile - Dr Keorapetse Tabane**

Dr Tabane is a Medical Oncologist at Sandton Oncology and an Icon Oncology Network Oncologist. In May 2008, after 12 years of study, she became South Africa’s first black Medical Oncologist. She was born in Hebron, north of Pretoria, and matriculated from Tsogo High School in Mmakau. In 1999, she completed a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBChB) at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University - formerly known as Medunsa (Medical University of South Africa). Following an internship at Kalafong Hospital in Atteridgeville, community service in Mokopane (previously known as Potgietersrus) and a stint in emergency medicine, Dr Tabane specialised in internal medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2002. She was certified as a specialist physician in 2005, and then went onto achieve her Medical Oncology qualification.

Dr Tabane is passionate about patient care, and believes in shared decision-making and open communication which places the patient’s well-being at the centre. Her special interests include breast cancer, ovarian cancer and the treatment of cancer with immunotherapy. Dr Tabane is a



cofounder of the the HappiMe Foundation, which hopes to inspire a generation of young women to own their health journeys, as well as their dreams.

### **About Icon**

Icon Oncology Holdings represents subsidiaries, Icon Radiotherapy, Icon Network and Icon Managed Care. Across its business, Icon is the South African pioneer of Value-Based Care (VBC) in cancer treatment. Icon represents 80% of oncologists in private practice who collaboratively develop provider-driven protocols that have been proven to significantly improve efficacy and efficiencies in cancer care.

For more information visit [www.iconsa.co.za](http://www.iconsa.co.za)