



## Disparities in the health system delay the improvement of a cancer patient

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Health disparities: We hear that concept a lot! But do we know what it really means? The World Health Organization (WHO) defines disparities as barriers, limitations or disadvantages in access to medical care, care or access to health services in a cancer patient and Puerto Rico is no exception. Disparities are more than simple inequalities that populations exhibit and that can later induce disease or exacerbate it from its natural state. These inequalities create scenarios where the patient does not benefit in any of the phases of their diagnosis or treatment and places greater difficulty on the caregiver who is often in charge of coordinating medical services and care for the patient.

The annual report of the Puerto Rico Department of Health (2022-2023) shows that at least 68% of the population is diagnosed with at least one chronic disease. Suffering from a chronic disease implies having a disease that has no cure, but there are treatments available to manage the symptoms of said disease. In PR, more than half of the population is facing this type of diagnosis and therefore has encountered one or more barriers in some aspect of their medical care. However, the condition of greatest concern and attention remains cancer compared to diabetes, depression, arthritis or diseases associated with the immune system. Every individual is at risk of suffering from cancer at some point in their life and it is currently scientifically and socio-demographic proven that cancer patients more frequently experience multiple barriers that place them in a disadvantaged position with other patients who suffer from the condition.

Some of the barriers observed in Puerto Rico are the following: poor education, limited transportation, economic problems, limiting beliefs, myths rooted in their culture, difficulty with medical coverage, limited medical or clinical assistance, environmental disadvantage and high levels of poverty. These disparities can be very harmful to a patient's health and decision making in a family since being in these scenarios, a patient's health can gradually worsen. In addition, the services that cancer patients need as part of their daily routine are dispersed or segregated, making it difficult for the patient or caregiver to access them more easily and in less time. That is why it has been proven in Puerto Rico and Latin America that the higher the level of disparity, the lower the hope and the lower the quality of life for the patient.

Remember that cancer care and services are extremely important to follow and complete. If you have any questions or concerns about how to access the services that apply to you, do not hesitate to consult your health professional or a social worker so they can guide you through the process. They can connect you directly with the right people and resources to assist you successfully.

