



## A question of human dignity

→ Mary Robinson ■ GUEST EDITOR

**S**ocial and economic progress over the course of the last century has helped people in many countries enjoy longer, healthier lives. Public health, by and large, has improved and health interventions are now available to prevent or treat most conditions, including cancer.

Yet cancer continues to kill millions of people worldwide every year and the death toll is projected to rise dramatically. A full 70% of these deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries.

According to the WHO, up to one third of the cancer burden could be cured if detected early and treated adequately, and another third could be reduced through cancer prevention strategies aimed at reducing the exposure to cancer risk. These include changes in tobacco use, immunisation against HPV infection and control of occupational hazards.

Cervical cancer is just one example. Although we have the tools to prevent this terrible disease, it affects an estimated 500,000 women each year and leads to more than 250,000 deaths – the vast majority in developing countries. Most women affected do not have access to local health systems or routine gynaecological care, including regular screening, which plays a critical role in preventing cancer in industrialised countries.

Much more must be done to encourage the international support necessary to make

life-saving tools such as HPV vaccines available to those who need them most and to ensure that robust health systems are in place to support their delivery.

The World Cancer Declaration, which will be launched at the UICC World Cancer Congress in Geneva this August, outlines the critical steps needed to build the basis for sustainable delivery of effective cancer prevention, early detection, treatment and palliative care worldwide. The Congress provides a critical forum for health professionals, policy makers and advocates to galvanise the global health community behind the goals of the Declaration.

These and other steps to advance global health are not just matters of moral concern: they are issues of fundamental human rights.

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that “everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including medical care.”

As members of The Elders, we have highlighted the right to health as part of the Every Human Has Rights Campaign ([www.everyhumanhasrights.org](http://www.everyhumanhasrights.org)) to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration.

The message that health is a fundamental human right must be heard again today. We all have a role to play in moving the cancer control agenda forward.

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*Mary Robinson, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, is the President of Realizing Rights ([www.realizingrights.org](http://www.realizingrights.org)) and a member of The Elders – a group of public figures noted as elder statesmen, peace activists, and human rights advocates*