

EDITORIAL

Breast cancer awareness in Pakistan

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Breast cancer is the malignancy of the breast tissue which is the most frequently diagnosed cancer in women worldwide. Globally it is accounted for 23% of all cancer cases.¹ All women despite of their racial or ethnic origin, or heritage are at risk of breast cancer.² According to WHO, more than 1.2 million people are diagnosed with breast cancer worldwide every year.³

Among Asian countries, Pakistan has the highest rate of breast cancer. Evidence from Karachi cancer registry indicates that the age standardized annual rate of breast cancer is 69.1 per 100,000. This figure is equivalent to European and North American rates.⁴ In Lahore, over a period of 8 years, there were 3,338 cases of breast cancer which presented at Shaukat Khanum hospital. Current figures indicate that in Pakistan, breast cancer affects both young and middle-aged women and can affect women as young as 20 years of age.⁵

Because of other compelling healthcare issues, breast cancer is not regarded as a health care priority and cancer awareness programs are either nonexistent or dysfunctional in the third world. Just to give a quick comparison, 75% of the women conduct Breast Self-Examination (BSE) in the United States,⁶ in contrast only 30.3% of the females from Saudi Arabia have even heard of BSE.⁶ In Iran 1402 women were interviewed recently and only 61% of the respondents knew about breast cancer.⁷ Similarly, awareness about breast cancer screening in Pakistan can be recognized from the fact that only 14% of mammography tests performed at the leading cancer institute were for a screening purpose.⁸

In most of the developing countries, the incidence of breast cancer is currently low, but rapid industrialization, westernization of lifestyle, urban development, an increase in life expectancy, and delayed and reduced fertility are some of the factors responsible for increasing the incidence of breast cancer and it seems that the incidence will continue to grow in the years to come.⁹

Breast cancer awareness is an effort to raise consciousness and reduce the stigma of breast cancer through education on symptoms and treatment. Supporters hope that greater knowledge will lead to earlier detection of breast cancer, which is associated with higher long-term survival rates, and that money raised for breast cancer will produce a reliable and permanent cure. It is the most frequent malignancy of women, and leading cause of female cancer related mortality. Breast cancer rates are increasing in developed

as well as developing countries. Prognosis and survival rates of breast cancer are better in developed countries due to early diagnosis and treatment.¹⁰ In countries with limited resources, majority of females present at advanced or metastatic stage, leading to poor outcome.¹¹

Breast cancer advocacy and awareness efforts are a type of health support. Breast cancer advocates raise funds and lobby for better care, more knowledge, and more patient empowerment. In our socioeconomic set-up, the only feasible solution to promote early detection of breast cancer is to create 'breast cancer awareness' among female population. This is only possible, if we know the present level of knowledge, attitudes and practices of our female population towards this disease.¹²

(a) Government agencies, non-government organizations and the media can play a major role in increasing awareness about breast cancer among the general public. It should be ensured that awareness campaigns are in regional languages to have a better penetration. Awareness about breast feeding and its protective effects also needs to be imparted to decrease the risk of breast cancer.

(b) If local celebrities can be involved to promote the cause, it will further strengthen awareness activities.

(c) There is also a need to strengthen the cancer-related curriculum in medical schools, focusing on breast cancer awareness and screening methods.

(d) Public health workers can be trained in Clinical Breast Examination to reach out to the length and width of the country.

(e) Programs should be devised for surgeons to train them in the appropriate surgical management and referral. Continued medical education can help in training the general surgeons in basic skills of breast surgery. Guidelines for breast cancer management are feasible and practical.¹³

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