

Education is key to preventing cancer fatalities



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As a leading global distributor of pharmaceuticals many of the drugs that Durbin regularly source and supply are treatments for cancers. According to the UAE Cancer Registry, the top five cancers that affect people are breast, colorectal, gastric, thyroid and lung. Breast cancer however is one of the most common forms of female cancer in the Middle East. One in 900 women in Jordan is diagnosed with breast cancer annually, making it the most common type among women in the country. In neighbouring Lebanon, the numbers are significantly higher, with approximately 1,750 women being diagnosed each year, or about five per day.

According to The World Health Organisation (WHO) mortality rates from breast cancer in the Arab world are much higher in comparison to the rest of the world. In addition to this, it also affects a large proportion of women at a younger age, for example 50% of cancer patients in Lebanon are under the age of 50. The *Asian Pacific Journal of Cancer Prevention* has further identified that many of the affected women are only diagnosed when their cancer is at advanced stage. This is largely due to a delay in presenting symp-

toms. If the disease is diagnosed early, the resulting treatment is usually less invasive, more effective and can increase the chances of survival. Therefore, the main concern is why some women wait so long to seek medical advice.

There are many factors that hinder early screening. Three common reasons relate to fear, misinformation and costs. According to HealthyWomen.org, there is a danger that some women are so overwhelmed by anxiety that they postpone or avoid screenings. They may be fearful to seek medical help as they identify how serious and frightening actually hearing the word 'cancer' can be. To add to this, as most women know someone who has been diagnosed with breast cancer, they may know how difficult it can be to undergo surgery and treatment.

On the other hand, there are many who know very little about the disease and consequently might not recognise typical symptoms or warning signs. If they have not been educated about the disease, they are likely to disregard the benefits of early screening and treatment. In Jordan, Egypt and Syria more than 65% of breast cancer cases are detected at advanced stages, indicating a lack of information provided to the public. By educating people, it is possible to change the attitudes and behaviour of those women who are most at risk and hopefully early screening can become common practice. The Jordan Breast Cancer Program (JBCP) has a mission to advise people on and encourage earlier screening to catch the disease 'where it is most curable, survival rates are highest, and treatment costs are lowest'. This is done by improving the accessibility of screening services, especially to remote or underprivileged areas where there is little access to healthcare.

Many effective forms of preventative care such as mammograms and physical examinations are not covered by insurance companies and so come at an extra cost. This, along with the treatment that follows

can add up to be a huge financial burden, especially if a long course of treatment is needed. Some governments, such as those in Lebanon and Jordan, do however have programmes that fund aspects of cancer care. The Breast Cancer Arabia Foundation helps by financially sponsoring women who need their help, to undergo treatment and provide support throughout.

A lack of knowledge seems to be a major barrier for many women, so education about the subject is an essential first step. However, it is clear that there are also other factors which need to be addressed. Accessibility in all forms is largely accountable for the lack of early screening. If these women cannot afford to undergo preventative care, or do not know how or where to go for screenings, the number of breast cancer fatalities will continue to increase. It is important to instil confidence that breast cancer is not necessarily fatal if it is diagnosed early enough. When needed, companies like Durbin can source and supply the latest treatments, but put simply 'education and early detection is the best protection'. **MEH**

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