

Breast Cancer Awareness and Screening: A New Approach

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Breast cancer is the most common cancer among the women of India and Kerala. Around 5000 cases of breast cancer occur in Kerala yearly, and a third of these patients are treated at the Regional Cancer Centre (RCC), Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India. Almost all of these are self-detected, and a good number are in the locally advanced stage. Cancer screening is not yet a priority in our society. The advantages of early detection and proper treatment of breast cancer are not fully understood by the community.¹ Breast awareness, clinical breast examination (CBE), and mammogram are the screening methods. A mammogram is not a cost-effective method in our population. It is mainly used to aid diagnosis in clinically suspicious cases.²

CBE has not picked up as a screening modality as most clinicians do not make an effort to advise regarding the role of CBE as a screening method and women are reluctant to approach surgeons on their own. Self-breast examination is advised by many doctors, but ladies are not fully aware of the changes occurring in their breast and fail to detect cancer at an early stage.^{3,4}

Many of the breast cancers are detected in the locally advanced stage. Almost all are self-detected. Most women are aware of screening programs, but very few have undergone any screening method; among those who had screened, most of them had done it only once. The need to continue screening is not understood by the society. Screening mammograms may not be an appropriate option in our community due to the concerns regarding cost and availability.⁵

I was part of a big campaign against breast cancer named Snehathalam, which was really an eye opener to all those who work in the field of cancer screening.

This program was done to detect early cases of breast cancer in the community by way of CBE done by trained lady doctors from Community Medicine Department, who referred suspicious cases to doctors from the RCC, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India, who examined them outside of the cancer center and enabled detection of cases of breast cancer. Awareness classes to educate regarding risk factors for breast cancer and importance of early detection and proper treatment were also conducted as part of the Screening camps.

Principles of primary health care such as intersectoral coordination, community participation, accessible expert services, and appropriate technology were followed for this campaign.

Coordinated effort of an apex institution RCC (Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India which caters to at least one-third of the cancer care needs of the state), A medical college in the private sector (Sree Gokulam Medical College and Research Foundation), a Local NGO (Swasthi Saukhya; Health Wing of Swasthi Foundation), and Media partners (Manorama and Asianet Cable Vision) were the key to the success of this program.

Public health professionals from the medical college conducted awareness programs and baseline screening through community camps. Experts from RCC conducted evening service clinics to give guidance and expert opinion and further investigations for those referred from the camp. Wide media coverage in reputed newspapers and TV channels improved publicity and attracted more women to the camp. Religious and political leaders, celebrities from art and culture, civil servants, doctors, officers and many homemakers came forward and subjected themselves to screening.

Program Achievements

Snehathalam conducted 101 breast cancer screening camps in 66 days, probably “the first ever marathon breast cancer screening campaign” in the world. Program could screen a total of 9942 women by CBE by lady doctors. Among these 868 ladies with a breast lump were referred, for expert opinion to RCC doctors who advised 258 mammograms and confirmed breast cancer in 12 women.

The pilot phase of “Snehathalam” is the first ever marathon breast screening campaign; which could not only screen 9942 women in 66 days through 101 camps but also win their hearts. All these screening camps were conducted by five lady doctors from Community Medicine Department of a Private Medical College, which makes this campaign distinct from others. Effortless services of these public health professionals could be an inspiration for others in the field. Most of the screening programs world over take years to screen so many ladies. Effective planning, coordination and selfless service were the key to the success of the program.

World cancer days 2016-2018 will explore how everyone - collectively or as individuals can do their part to reduce the global burden of cancer. Just as cancer affects everyone in different ways, all people have the power to take various actions to reduce the impact that cancer has on individuals, families and communities. World cancer day is a chance to reflect on various aspects of cancer control including early detection.⁶

End Note

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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