

Overcoming The Challenges of Big C In India

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Sir,

Breast cancer is a devastating disease that affects a woman's life, but survival rates continue to improve due to the advances in the treatment of breast cancer. According to Globocan Statistics 2020, with a cumulative risk of 2.81, contributed to 13.5% of all cancer cases and 10.6% of all deaths in India and is anticipated to have 2 million diagnosed cases worldwide by 2030.¹ Asia is the region responsible for 43% of newly diagnosed cases and 50% of all breast cancer deaths globally². With a prevalence rate of 25.8 cases per 100,000 people, breast cancer is the most common cancer in India and accounted for 13.6% of all new cancer cases and around 13.3 fatalities per 100,000 people in 2020. When breast cancer is discovered at stage IV as opposed to stage I, the survival rate dropped by 2.7 times, and as a result about 90,408 Indian women lost their lives in 2020.² According to a study by National Cancer Registry Program, it is estimated that incidences of cancer in India will increase by 12.8% in 2025 as compared to 2020.³ Reasons for variation include differences in genetic predispositions, reproductive status (e.g., number of children, age at first child), demographic (e.g. education), and lifestyle (e.g. smoking, alcohol or tobacco consumption).⁴ Early detection is the key for better prognosis, however in India it is diagnosed in advanced stages in many cases.

CHALLENGES FACED

Diagnosis of breast cancer at advanced stages contributes to the high mortality rate due to less awareness and limited access to diagnostic & treatment facilities in rural & suburban areas. Factors like social stigma, gender inequality, fear, and lack of knowledge contribute to presentation in advanced stages. In India, there is no national screening program due to limited resources and everyone cannot afford the expensive investigations. Infrastructure and resource limitations make it difficult to achieve the goal of improving breast cancer outcomes through early detection and treatment. Breast cancer can be treated very favorably with a good prognosis and even lower mortality if diagnosed early. Additionally, an abundance of scientific evidence supports the notion that 30% of cancers are curable if identified early and treated promptly. In our country most of the patients consult to doctors when they fall sick, however the regular screening or health check-ups not in majority of population. Many cases in our tertiary care, university hospital present in advanced stages and they tell similar reason that they were not feeling pain, so they did not consult or investigated the painless lump.

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CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Even if women must balance work, family, and elder care, it is still expected that they put the needs of others before their own, even if this negatively affects their health. Women are left with little time, energy and finances to invest in their health and well-being. To keep the society expectations, women take pride in the sacrifices to prioritize everyone else's before their own. It makes sense that the incidence of breast cancer is worryingly rising among Indian women. The act of cultural transformation from rural to modern society resulted in a lack of communication. Most of the breast cancer cases present as painless lumps so women visit the hospital only after it's intolerable and usually do not discuss their health issues regarding their breasts with male members of the family due to social inhibitions, shyness, and mostly delay the diagnosis.⁵ Due to urbanization, much of the young generation moved to cities leading to less availability of caregivers. Many of the breast cancer patients are young and have dependent children, they need even more support from the adult members of the family.

NEED FOR SUPPORT GROUPS

Among breast cancer survivors, there is frequently a widespread sense of separation from society & difficulty readjusting to normal societal norms as losing one's breast can have a profound effect on mental health and constantly feeling threatened while also grieving over the loss of a body component. The traditional approach of care for breast cancer survivors puts less emphasis on the psychological and emotional facets of care and focuses more on the medical aspects and early diagnosis of recurrence.⁵ The journey through breast cancer can be a lonely one. The physical and emotional toll of the disease, coupled with the complexities of treatment, can leave patients feeling isolated. A few of the challenges brought on by the tragedy of developing breast cancer include adjusting to the early diagnosis of the disease, planning for surgical procedures and combination therapies, overcoming treatment-related side effects, anticipating improvement or full recovery on the one hand, and relapse of the disease on the other, and waiting for death in cases of disease progression⁵. This is where breast cancer support groups come in as physical mental and social life for survivors is never the same again.

There are legitimate worries that many oncologic patients do not currently receive the proper care that meets their needs, despite the significant advancements made in the last few decades in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer patients as well as the potential for therapeutic innovations that are currently in the works. According to Rama Sivaram, who is working with cancer support groups, the needs of women with breast cancer are being recognized as

something going beyond clinical management. The collateral damages include long-term and short-term clinical side effects that require a long-term combination of medical and rehabilitation services that the hospital addresses. The concept of addressing the needs emerged and most of the support groups employ a complementary therapy approach. The needs addressed are nutrition after breast cancer for prevention and optimal quality of life, bone health, yoga and pranayama for body and mind, management of lymphedema and mental health issues through various complementary healing therapies. It encourages sharing experiences, identifying issues impacting their lives, accessing resources, and learning from each other. The initiative addresses both body, mind, and health issues and their mental constructs, which play a vital role in wellness. Most support groups meet once a month or possibly once a fortnight to share happy times and a different session in each meeting. Over time, these have proven to have a positive impact on women's well-being. Support groups have emerged as a powerful tool in bringing cancer patients, caregivers, and survivors together. The effectiveness of cancer support groups as an intervention to enhance patients' psychosocial well-being has been studied widely.⁶ The fundamental idea behind support groups is that those who join can get emotional support by creating a safe space to express emotions and fears, share personal experiences and stories by offering a sense of belonging and understanding, learning from the experiences of others, and access to wisdom, experiences, resources, and services to improve the quality of life during & after the treatment.

POLICY AND SYSTEMIC SUGGESTIONS

There is need for team of senior leaders consists of multidisciplinary experts to educate and train the healthcare workers, paramedics and grass root workers for raising the alarm in the breast diseases and send those women to get investigated. Regular awareness camps about screening of breast cancer physically and through the social media. A study was conducted in our institution for the awareness camps, outreach activities and screening mammography, which has provided a positive outcome in the region.⁷ Breast cancer comprehensive care should include the team of healthcare workers, paramedics along with the support groups. Support groups cover a wide range of topics; behavioral issues and symptoms (such as pain, exhaustion) and address emotional expression. Group therapies can address difficulties associated to cancer that go beyond individual therapy. This allows patients to receive emotional support from other patients who have gone through similar situations, and they can use these experiences to reduce their fears. The development of the patient's unique resources is one of the main goals of therapy. As a result, these groups aid patients as well as their partners and other family members by eas-

ing the suffering associated with cancer.⁸ A key element in the prevention of cancer is the promotion of healthy lifestyles. Cancer survivors should be encouraged for healthy eating, regular exercise, quitting smoking, moderation in alcohol intake, and stress reduction strategies through educational programs. Narratives from personal experience generate empathy, understanding, and encourage people to adopt preventive actions and schedule routine examinations. Survivors can tell their stories and stress the need for prompt assistance via a variety of channels, including social media, support groups, and public speaking engagements.

The team can spread the awareness in the communities about the importance of routine screenings and seeking immediate medical assistance for any possible symptoms from medical fraternity members and cancer survivors. They can assist in addressing frequent misconceptions or anxieties about cancer screenings, motivating people to get over their reluctance and give their health a priority. Survivors can work with medical groups, take part in public awareness campaigns, or distribute educational materials to make sure that people are aware of the advantages of early detection and the range of screening choices. Educating communities about screening may be better accomplished through awareness-raising activities.

CALL FOR ACTION

All hospitals should take the necessary steps to launch breast cancer support groups. Hospitals ought to inform patients and their families about the different benefits of support groups. There should be literature on the numerous government initiatives and programs available at hospitals. If you or a loved

one has been diagnosed with breast cancer, consider comprehensive and holistic care - it could make all the difference.

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