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Arab women at risk of breast cancer: Studies
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By Fazeena Saleem

DOHA: The month of October saw diverse and innovative awareness campaigns on breast cancer, while studies say Arab women are at significant risk of getting the disease.

"Qatar is looking at more aspects of awareness, even outside of October. The country is educating its citizens, said Karen Al Kharouf at Think Pink Qatar.

"Qatar is now getting into a massive awareness campaign in universities and schools. This will make the daughters talk to the mothers about the symptoms and the need of early diagnoses can cure," she said.

Many campaigns including workshops, lectures, walks, pink hijab day were held to create more awareness among both men and women about breast cancer. The social networks too had its own type of awareness campaigns. Facebook users created interesting status messages as where would they like the handbags or wallets kept at home.

"Even the US took 20 years to bring awareness about breast cancer. The Arab women do not talk in public about symptoms due to the cultural background. Other Gulf countries such as Kuwait, Bahrain and Jordan too have dynamic awareness programmes," said Al Kharouf.

However, studies say breast cancer is the most common cancer among women in Arab countries. Al Amal Hospital in Doha reported that 20 percent of cancer cases receiving treatment in 2007 were breast cancer among women. Gulf Centre for Cancer Registration for breast cancer incidence from 1988-2002 ranked Qatar as third highest in the Middle East region, just after Bahrain and Kuwait. "Early detection and treatment can reduce breast cancer morbidity and mortality rates significantly. Arab women are at significant risk due to the lack of early diagnosis and treatment for this disease because they are often diagnosed at advanced stages of breast cancer," said Dr Tam Truong Donnelly (pictured), Associate Professor, Faculty of Nursing at the Calgaru University in Qatar. She is presently doing a three year study on factors that influence breast cancer screening practices among Arab women in Qatar.

Screening and early detection reduces breast cancer mortality by 35 to 30 percent. However, the sparse data from Qatar and other countries in the Middle East suggest that Arab women do not fully engage in breast cancer screening activities and services.

"What we want to determine is how Arab women view breast cancer screening. The information gathered will be used to formulate an appropriate educational programme and health services that will be Qatari-sensitive and Qatari-appropriate to promote screening activity for Arab women," said Donnelly.

The further believes intervention strategies should be comprehensive, culturally sensitive and appropriate for Arab women, and applicable to the social context of Qatar. However, other studies have shown that education and encouragement, positive attitudes toward screening were often integrated with traditional and religious beliefs and worked together to promote breast cancer screening. Addressing women's perceptions, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs regarding breast cancer and screening, together with aspects of the health care system, socioeconomic, and social milieu strongly influence cancer preventative practices.

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