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To assess the knowledge of Pakistani women about breast cancer in order to form a database for planning feasible breast cancer awareness and screening program in Pakistan

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Materials & methods: Face to face interviews were conducted using a standard questionnaire (n=400). Information was gathered about risk factors, personal risk perception, lifestyle effects, early diagnosis & breast cancer.

Results: The age range was 25-65 years with a fairly uniform distribution of socioeconomic status and educational level. Knowledge regarding risk factors for breast cancer was very poor. 35% women were aware of their risk of breast cancer and majority admitted having a great fear of it. Most women thought early diagnosis was not possible and would not change the outcome. Lifestyle factors were not considered to be important by majority of respondents. 83% believed diet and physical activity had no effect on the risk profile. Tight bra, deodorant usage and large breast size were seen as significant risk factors by 70% respondents. Only 35% women were aware of the protective effect of breast feeding. Correct knowledge about mammogram was sparse and a significant proportion actually believed it could cause. Likewise only a small minority was aware of BSE and only 4% of those who were aware actually practiced it.

Conclusion: Breast cancer is the commonest female cancer in Pakistan and a rising incidence has been reported. The importance of lifestyle factors in causation of breast cancer cannot be overstated and a recent study reaffirms that factors such as maintaining a healthy weight, breastfeeding, exercising regularly can reduce the risk for breast cancer. This study highlights that the level of knowledge about breast cancer, associated risk factors and screening is very low, irrespective of socio-economic and educational status. A national women awareness program is urgently needed. There is also a clear need for intervention to reduce the huge gap between knowledge and practice. Another important observation made in this study was that breast cancer screening and prevention was never discussed or offered to 96% women by their doctors. This shows the clear need of capacity building of doctors and Para medical staff along with significance of information dissemination up to level of beneficiaries.

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