Baseline Needs Assessment for Breast Cancer Awareness and Management among Paramedical Health Care Providers in Iraq

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Abstract: Background: Breast cancer ranks the first malignancy among the Iraqi population since three decades. The reported gap in the knowledge regarding that disease emphasizes the necessity for practical policy decisions to elevate the level of awareness among the Iraqi women, who often rely on their primary health care providers to obtain adequate guidance. Objectives: To assess the baseline needs for breast cancer awareness among paramedical health care providers in Iraq through exploring the level of knowledge, beliefs and attitudes towards the practice and management of breast cancer. Methodology: One hundred paramedical health care providers including nurses, biologists and laboratory technicians, working in different departments of the Medical City Teaching Hospital, were involved in the current study. Each was asked to complete a structured questionnaire format which was prepared to evaluate the level of knowledge and beliefs towards breast cancer and its risk factors (18 items), barriers to screening (16 items) and the attitudes regarding the practice and management of early detection (8 items). Results: The answers of the respondents regarding the knowledge on breast cancer and its risk factors were remarkably good; approximately 83% had a score of 70% and over. It was interesting to observe that 95% expressed willingness to join our National Cancer Research Program and 97% were interested to learn more about breast cancer. Nevertheless, their positive impact on the beliefs towards the management and barriers to early detection of breast cancer in Iraq was relatively fair. While 77% actively proposed instructing all patients on the technique of Breast Self-Examination, only 52% had positive attitudes regarding providing Clinical Breast Examination if the women have no complaints; over 60% believed that women generally refuse to expose their breasts to a male physician and less than 50% agreed on offering Ultrasound to all women presenting with breast pain. On the other hand, about 70% readily accepted screening mammography if there is any breast complaint, 86% emphasized that patients actually go for needle aspiration when prescribed by the specialist and 64% confirmed that all diagnosed cases in their practice are usually scheduled for operations by examining surgeons in the same hospital. Conclusion and Recommendations: Our findings reveal insufficient conformity in the attitudes towards the practice of breast cancer management among the general paramedical providers in spite of their acceptable level of awareness. Abiding to protocol guidelines, through directed interventions, is mandatory to ensure overcoming the existing barriers and adopting a successful nationwide public health educational program on breast cancer control.

Keywords: Assessment, breast cancer, awareness, management, paramedical health care providers, Iraq

1. Introduction

In Iraq, breast cancer ranks the first among the population accounting for about 19% of all newly diagnosed cancers and 34.4% of the registered female cancers with an incidence rate approximating 23/100,000 female population (1). The highest frequencies are often encountered among middle aged women who usually present at advanced stages (2,3) reflecting the limited access to screening, diagnostic and treatment facilities accompanied by lack of awareness on the significance of cancer control among the population (4-7).

It has been documented that almost 20% of Iraqi women presenting with palpable breast lumps in a major hospital were diagnosed with cancer. Only 32% sought medical advice within the first month after detection although in 47% the disease was at advanced stages (2). Earlier studies from Iraq revealed that about 50% of the educated Iraqi women had low knowledge scores on breast cancer (6); their awareness on the means of early detection of the disease and its risk factors were significantly associated with practicing BSE (8). Such gaps about the relative importance of breast cancer in the community emphasized the necessity for practical policy decisions to elevate the level of awareness among Iraqi women (4,9,10). Accordingly, the Regional Breast Cancer Research Project was initiated to document the clinical characteristics and management outcomes of patients diagnosed with the disease; with an emphasis on promoting public awareness campaigns on the significance of controlling the disease (11).

In many settings, women rely on their primary health care providers to obtain adequate guidance on cancer management. Focusing on the health care system within the Eastern Mediterranean Region, it was noted that within hospital records of many countries, there is improper documentation on the putative risk factors for breast cancer and the clinical profile of patients with the disease (11). Studies in the literature displayed that adherence to the screening recommendation guidelines has been suboptimal among the practicing health care providers (12). The perceptions and attitudes varied according to the gender, specialty and family practices (13,14); indicating a lack of
conformity in breast cancer screening practices among providers in different geographical settings.

The main objective of this study is to assess the level of awareness, beliefs and attitudes towards the practice and management of breast cancer among sample of paramedical health care providers in Iraq.

2. Methodology

Study Design: Descriptive study.

Study Sample: One hundred paramedical health care providers who worked under direct supervision of senior medical specialists. Those included Nurse Practitioners (41), Biologists (27) Laboratory Technicians (32) from the various departments of the Medical City Teaching Hospital in Baghdad. Fifty-five percent of the respondents were females and 57% had experienced over 10 years of practice in the medical sector (Table 1). It was interesting to observe that 95% expressed willingness to join our National Cancer Research Program and 97% were interested to learn more about breast cancer.

Study Setting: Data were collected and analyzed, within the National Cancer Research Center of Baghdad University and the Oncology Teaching Hospital of the Medical City Hospital in Iraq, during the period from June 2015 till May 2016.

Instrument Construction: Respondents were asked to complete a comprehensive structured questionnaire format which was prepared to evaluate the level of knowledge and beliefs towards breast cancer and its risk factors (18 items), barriers to screening (16 items) and the attitudes regarding the practice of the early detection techniques (8 items) among the studied sample of the paramedical health care providers. The overall knowledge score was classified as Poor (<50), Just Passed (50-59), Fair (60-69), Good (70-79), Very Good (80-89) and Excellent (≥90).

Data Collection: The investigators held a direct interview with each respondent to obtain the requested data utilizing the constructed questionnaire format and informed written consents.

Statistical Analysis: Data were analyzed through the application of statistical procedures using the statistical package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 22).

3. Results

Table 1: Characteristics of the Respondents.

| Variables            | Frequency/100 |
|----------------------|---------------|
| **Profession**       |               |
| Nurse Practitioners  | 41            |
| Biologists           | 27            |
| Laboratory Technicians | 32          |
| **Gender**           |               |
| Male                 | 45            |
| Female               | 55            |

The answers of the respondents regarding the knowledge on breast cancer and its risk factors were remarkably good; approximately 83% had a score of 70% and over, while 11.1% presented excellent responses (Tables 2 and 3). The
most confusing questions were those related to the significance of mammography in down staging and reducing the mortality from the disease and the effect of postmenopausal obesity on increasing the risk of breast cancer.

Table 3: Knowledge Scores on the responses related to breast cancer and its risk factors

| Scores of Correct Answers | Frequency | % of Total |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Poor (< 50)               | 0         | 0          |
| Passed (50 – 59)          | 0         | 0          |
| Fair (60 – 69)            | 3         | 16.7       |
| Good (70 – 79)            | 8         | 44.4       |
| Very Good (80 – 89)       | 5         | 27.8       |
| Excellent (>90)           | 2         | 11.1       |
| Total                     | 18        | 100.0      |

Table 4: Assessment of the level of Beliefs towards breast cancer management and the Barriers to early detection

| Items                                                                 | Yes F/100 | No F/100 | Uncertain F/100 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------|-----------------|
| 1) Belief that early detection of BC could significantly improve survival | 95        | 3        | 2               |
| 2) Necessity to include CBE in the routine clinical check-up of female patients, even if they have no breast complaints | 81        | 12       | 7               |
| 3) Urgent need to educate the community about risk factors of BC       | 98        | 1        | 1               |
| 4) Educating men about BC could have a positive impact on the breast health care of their wives | 87        | 8        | 5               |
| 5) Annual screening mammography could lead to BC                       | 7         | 87       | 6               |
| 6) Most women fear examination because they think breast cancer is a fatal disease | 90        | 7        | 3               |
| 7) Some women could think that breast examination is against cultural beliefs | 23        | 69       | 8               |

Table 5: Score-related responses regarding Beliefs and Barriers to early detection and management of breast cancer

| Items                                                                 | Poor < 50 | Passed (50 – 59) | Fair (60 – 69) | Good (70 – 79) | Very Good (80 – 89) | Excellent (>90) | Total |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------------|----------------|----------------|---------------------|----------------|-------|
| 1) Belief that early detection of BC could significantly improve survival | 0         | 0                | 18.8           | 25.0           | 6.3                 | 31.3           | 18    |
| 2) Necessity to include CBE in the routine clinical check-up of female patients, even if they have no breast complaints | 3         |                  | 8              |                |                     | 1              | 4     |
| 3) Urgent need to educate the community about risk factors of BC       | 4         |                  |                | 1              |                     | 3              | 7     |
| 4) Educating men about BC could have a positive impact on the breast health care of their wives | 1         |                  |                | 5              |                     | 1              | 1     |
| 5) Annual screening mammography could lead to BC                       | 5         |                  |                | 3              |                     | 3              | 1     |
| 6) Most women fear examination because they think breast cancer is a fatal disease | 2         |                  |                | 7              |                     | 2              | 6     |
| 7) Some women could think that breast examination is against cultural beliefs | 3         |                  |                |                |                     | 2              | 3     |
| 8) Women are embarrassed to talk about their breast health care        | 82        | 16               | 2              |                |                     |                |       |
| 9) Women do not have enough family support                             | 68        | 30               | 2              |                |                     |                |       |
| 10) Women worry about being rejected by their husbands if a breast tumor is diagnosed | 74        | 19               | 7              |                |                     |                |       |
| 11) Women may think breast cancer will bring disgrace to their family  | 61        | 33               | 6              |                |                     |                |       |
| 12) Not all women have access to care                                  | 28        | 62               | 10             |                |                     |                |       |
| 13) Women cannot financially afford breast health care                 | 51        | 47               | 2              |                |                     |                |       |
| 14) Women may think that mammograms could cause cancer                 | 40        | 55               | 5              |                |                     |                |       |
| 15) Some women could think that a lump will go away by itself           | 51        | 45               | 4              |                |                     |                |       |
| 16) Some still think that breast health care is against religious beliefs | 15        | 81               | 4              |                |                     |                |       |

The responses regarding the beliefs towards breast cancer and the barriers to screening and early detection were less satisfactory. Although there was no failure rate, however, merely 56.4% of the paramedical health care providers presented positive impact approaching 70% and over. Nevertheless, 18.8% yielded excellent replies (Tables 4 and 5). It was illustrated that a proportion of the respondents believed that some Iraqi patients still think that a breast lump could fade by itself (45%), mammography could cause cancer (55%) and that women might not be able to afford breast health care financially (47%).

Table 6: Attitudes towards the Practice of early detection of breast cancer

| Items                                                                 | Always F/100 | Often F/100 | Sometimes F/100 | Rarely F/100 | Never F/100 | Uncertain F/100 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1) CBE* is practiced in the routine clinical check-up of female patients, even if they have no breast complaints | 30           | 22          | 5               | 6            | 10          |                 |
| 2) Women generally accept CBE during routine clinical check-up, even if they have no breast complaints | 34           | 24          | 29              | 8            | 2           | 3               |
| 3) BSE** is instructed to each patient with breast complaints         | 55           | 22          | 15              | 4            | 0           | 4               |
| 4) Breast Ultrasound screening is offered to all patients if they have only breast pain. | 22           | 24          | 29              | 12           | 0           | 13              |
| 5) Women readily accept screening mammography if they have breast complaints. | 36           | 33          | 10              | 5            | 0           | 16              |
| 6) All patients readily go for fine needle aspiration if they are instructed by their surgeons. | 33           | 53          | 9               | 2            | 0           | 3               |
| 7) Women generally refuse to examine their breasts by a male surgeon. | 19           | 42          | 32              | 7            | 0           | 0               |
| 8) Patients diagnosed by BC are scheduled for operation in the same hospital. | 25           | 39          | 28              | 2            | 0           | 6               |

*CBE: Clinical Breast Examination
**BSE: Breast Self-Examination

Table (6) presents the recorded attitudes towards practicing the early detection techniques and abiding to the protocol guidelines. While 77% actively proposed instructing all patients on the technique of Breast Self-Examination, only 52% had positive attitudes regarding providing Clinical Breast Examination if the women have no complaints; over 60% believed that women generally refuse to expose their breasts to a male physician and less than 50% agreed on offering Ultrasound to all women presenting with breast pain. On the other hand, about 70% readily accepted...
screening mammography if there is any breast complaint, 86% emphasized that patients actually go for needle aspiration when prescribed by the specialist and 64% confirmed that usually all diagnosed cases in their practice are scheduled for operations by examining surgeons in the same hospital.

4. Discussion

In spite of the improvement in survival from breast cancer in high-resource settings, the risk continues to increase among women in middle- and low-income countries (15, 16). In Iraq, breast cancer has become a major threat to female health, being the leading cause of death after cardiovascular diseases among women, forming a cancer-related mortality rate of 23% (1,17). Having concluded that breast cancer is among the most common cancers amenable to early detection, WHO emphasized that strengthening screening and early detection are urgently recommended in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) to be built on the best international evidence and existing regional experience; taking into consideration the available resources, existing challenges and opportunities within the target population (18).

It was interesting to notice that the majority of the recruited sample in the study was willing to learn more about breast cancer and to join the activities of our National Cancer Research Program (97% and 95% respectively). In fact, the answers of the respondents regarding the knowledge on breast cancer and its risk factors were encouragingly good (83% had a score of 70% and over). The most confusing questions were those related to the hormonal related effects on the risk of breast cancer and the documented significance of mammography in down staging the disease and reducing its mortality. However, the responses regarding the beliefs towards the management of breast cancer and the barriers to early detection were less satisfactory, although 18.8% presented excellent scores. It was illustrated that a proportion of the paramedical health care providers believed that some patients still think that a breast lump could fade by itself (45%), mammography could cause cancer (55%) and that women might not be able to afford breast health care financially (47%).

Previous studies reported knowledge gaps regarding the topic of breast cancer and its control among the Iraqi population in general (5,6,8,19). The lack of well-designed diagnostic policies urgently necessitates the adoption of practical policy decisions to promote the abidance to a comprehensive breast cancer control strategy focusing primarily upon early detection through elevating the level of awareness among the Iraqi community (2-4, 9-11,20). In an earlier survey to determine the effects of peer education about breast cancer among female universities students in Baghdad, utilizing a pre and post-test educational model design, we demonstrated a significant rise in the level of knowledge after the intervention (19).

On evaluating the attitudes towards practicing the early detection techniques according to protocol guidelines in this study, our findings revealed that 77% of the respondents proposed instructing all patients on the procedure of BSE while only 52% had positive attitudes regarding providing CBE if the women have no complaints. Although more than 60% believed that women generally refuse to expose their breasts to a male physician, about 70% readily accepted screening mammography if there is any breast complaint and 86% emphasized that patients actually go for needle aspiration when prescribed by the specialist. In a recent case control study, that we carried out to compare the responses of a group of Iraqi female patients affected with breast cancer to a randomly selected group of apparently healthy women, it was found that the attitudes in both were relatively good with respect to seeking medical advice, accepting CBE, having the desire to be instructed on the technique of BSE and to undergo mammographic and fine needle biopsy examinations when requested (6).

In one of the studies that recruited primary care physicians it was reported that in spite of the fact that agreement with the National Cancer Institute and the American Cancer Society screening recommendations was high, for both CBE and mammography, practical adherence to those guidelines were suboptimal among providers (12). Another survey among primary care specialists in Washington State revealed that provider characteristics, including male gender and family practice specialty, predicted a lower adoption to CBE (13). In general, female primary health care providers in group practice settings were more likely to follow breast cancer screening guidelines (14). In Ontario, knowledge and practice gaps related to the implementation of the guideline recommendations for breast cancer management have been addressed within the primary care setting to improve the educational level of the providers through active interventions (21). Within the EMR, it has been reported that primary care providers, specifically the juniors, had low awareness, knowledge, and practices on breast cancer screening guidelines; stressing on the urgent need for postgraduate and continuous medical education (24-27).

Paramedical training is often directed to build capacities that are required to fulfill specific health-care roles, depending on the specialty, and is significantly less comprehensive than the sophisticated educational program requested for physicians. Earlier surveys from the United States have focused on the useful effective role of midlevel providers, including nurse practitioners and physician assistants, in cancer screening health promotion and disease prevention (22). Further studies emphasized on the implications for the educational needs of rural medical and paramedical health care providers regarding access to up-to-date cancer care information and guidelines for establishing effective referral linkages with the staff of the tertiary sector (23).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations:

In our country, women often rely on their primary health care providers to obtain adequate guidance on health promotion and screening. Our findings reveal insufficient conformity in the attitudes towards the practice of breast cancer management among the general paramedical providers in spite of their acceptable level of awareness. Capacity building of the paramedical staff, through directed interventions, is mandatory to ensure overcoming the existing barriers, abiding to protocol screening guidelines
and adopting a successful nationwide public health educational program on breast cancer control in Iraq.

6. Acknowledgement

The authors thank Dr. Rola Shaheen for her collaboration in designing the questionnaire utilized in the current study.

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