Reaching the unreachable

Addressing the challenges of breast cancer screening in Egypt

Who/where
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Challenge
How to bring much needed breast cancer screening to hard to reach Egyptian women

Solution
Deploy mobile mammography vans to local neighborhoods and offer free mammograms

Women's Health Outreach Program (WHOP), led by Dr. Dorria Saleh El Sayed Salem, uses Philips technology to examine thousands of women. A tireless advocate for women's health in her home country of Egypt, Dr. Dorria Saleh El Sayed Salem has spent the last six years coaxing Egyptian women out of the shadows to get a mammogram.

A serious problem

According to official data from 2001, the incidence of breast cancer in Egyptian women is inordinately high, approximately 42.5 per 100,000.[1] "Egyptian women, they never go to the doctor when they have a complaint," says Dr. Salem, "let alone when we are thinking of (cancer) screening."

Contributing to the problem is the general lack of awareness about breast cancer throughout the country.[2]

Further complicating the situation is a mistrust of primary healthcare providers and lack of knowledge about breast self-examination. These factors conspire to keep women away. As a result, breast cancers in Egypt often go undiagnosed until the late stages.[2]

"We have a problem," acknowledges Dr. Salem, "and the problem is that our cancers are only discovered in the third and fourth stages – when treatment is very expensive and the outcome is not fruitful."

Dr. Dorria Saleh El Sayed Salem, Professor of Radiology at Cairo University Hospital

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Meeting the challenge

From her position as Professor of Radiology at Cairo University and advisor to the Egyptian Ministry of Health, Dr. Salem felt she could make a difference. She proposed the organization of a national breast cancer-screening program.

A successful pilot program conducted in Cairo and Giza in 2007 was followed by the launch of a nationwide effort in 2008. Entitled, Women's Health Outreach Program (WHOP), plans were to spend five years traveling to all areas of the country (large cities and remote villages) using mobile mammography vans to offer free mammograms to women aged 45 and above.

States Dr. Salem, "Our target was not only to screen for breast cancer, but also for related risk factors of hypertension, diabetes, and obesity. We aimed to use all our resources to combat breast cancer through early detection; ongoing education and training for doctors, radiologists, and technicians; TV and radio awareness campaigns to reach the mass public; and research resulting in papers and posters."[1]

State-of-the-art mobile units

The aggressive program required advanced cancer detection technology. In 2008, Philips was awarded the contract to supply seven MammoDiagnost DR digital mammography systems to supplement those used during the pilot.

Six of the seven units were installed in mammography screening vans, which were also outfitted with advanced teleradiology equipment to ensure rapid expert diagnosis of exam results by qualified radiologists. The seventh, a fixed unit, was placed at the Nasr Institute.

Ready to bring free breast cancer screening to the target population, the WHOP embarked on a five-year effort to reach women in all 27 Egyptian Governorates.

Standout exams with MammoDiagnost DR

When selecting the mammography equipment to outfit the vans, Dr. Salem knew what she wanted. She chose the Philips MammoDiagnost DR, an advanced digital mammography system designed for high-volume screening exams.

"Digital mammography," says Dr. Salem, "I consider a gift from God – for outstanding imaging. The MammoDiagnost DR digital machine is very much suited for screening and for follow-ups. It is comfortable for patients and throughput is very quick."

The Philips MammoDiagnost DR offers:

- UNIQUE image processing, high DQE and small pixel size for excellent image quality
- Intuitive, ergonomic design, including Eleva interface for comfortable procedures
- Streamlined workflow, more efficient exams, and more patients examined

Speaking to the Washington Times, Dr. Salem notes that, "Combining early detection with free treatment gives women the best chance of surviving the disease.

Philips mobile mammography screening units enable earlier and more widespread diagnostics throughout the country, which significantly increases survival rates."[3]

Hundreds of women treated

Everyone agrees, the first five years of the WHOP program was a resounding success. The mobile units brought free screening directly into residential areas. When suspicious lesions were identified, follow-up studies were conducted. If a malignancy was confirmed, treatment, including surgery, was provided – free of charge.

"Our project has successfully screened more than 100,000 ladies," says Dr. Salem proudly. In fact, a total of 107,193 women were screened over the five years. 2,024 suspicious cases (BI-RADS 4 and BI-RADS 5) were identified. Of those:

- 454 proved to be pathologically malignant
- 478 were downgraded with ultrasound
- 544 are still being investigated

Of the malignant cases, 411 women were operated on, 153 conservatively and 258 by modified radical mastectomy.

On-going challenges

In a 2013 interview with AuntMinnieEurope, Dr. Salem acknowledges there are issues with the current process. The most concerning being some women who are screened initially and cannot be contacted for follow-up. "They come for screening, they're diagnosed, and then they refuse or escape treatment options," says Dr. Salem.[4] Of the 2,024 suspicious cases over the five years, 374 were subsequently deemed unreachable.

"We have to think outside of the box to get to these unreachables," she continues. "Customer 'touch points' are set up at teaching hospitals or cancer institutes. Encouraging letters are sent by hand to invite them to come back, and we go on the phones all the time."[4]

A bright future

The struggle to improve healthcare for Egyptian women is a passion of Dr. Salem's that will not end. The success of WHOP demonstrates the ability of modern technology to reach many of the heretofore unreachable. Supported by a group of motivated professionals (from radiologist to technician), she is confident the program can continue to provide vital services.

But Dr. Salem's vision is grander. She believes that WHOP success can stand as an example for other countries and areas of the world. "This project could easily be adapted in Africa and the Middle East," she says.

WHOP has received wide international recognition. In 2009, the program was awarded the prestigious WHO Award, and in 2010 & 2012, WHOP was recognized by The United Nations and awarded the 'UN Public Service Award' for its national breast cancer-screening program. Prestigious recognition for large-scale cancer screening effort.

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