

Producing evidence to advance mammography screening in Palestine

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Among women, breast cancer is the most prevalent form of cancer and the leading cause of death in Palestine. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health (MoH), in 2018, 432 cases of breast cancer were reported, making up 27.6% of total cancer cases among females.

A major aspect of controlling breast cancer is early detection. While diagnostic mammograms are used to check for breast cancer after identifying symptoms, screening mammograms are used to check for the disease in women who have no signs or symptoms. The latter is used to detect breast cancer in the preclinical stage, thereby reducing disease-associated morbidity and mortality.

In 2008-2009, the MoH started providing free mammography screening for breast cancer in the West Bank for women aged 40 and above as well as younger at-risk women. In 2010, the initiative expanded to Gaza.

In 2013, the Palestinian National Institute of Public Health (PNIPH) was assigned to assess the MoH's national breast cancer screening program. A retrospective cohort study was conducted based on 2011 data from mammography registry records in 12 districts. The objectives of the study were to examine cancer detection rates, false-positive rates, challenges faced by mammography technicians and physicians who read mammogram films, timeliness of responses to abnormal screening and diagnostic follow-up, and quality and completeness of cancer records in Palestine.

Based on the results and recommendations of the research, the MoH is developing guidelines for mammography screening and referral of suspected cancer cases. It has already improved infrastructure by raising the quantity and quality of available mammography machines and re-locating mammography facilities to be more accessible.

In close cooperation with PNIPH, the MoH has successfully been able to develop the national mammogram registry and is currently upgrading the national cancer registry. More female physicians are being trained to read mammography films in all districts, which has significantly increased the effectiveness of the program. Breast images have been digitized, making results easily accessible by radiologists and addressing the issue of limited film availability.

The MoH has also updated its breast cancer screening protocol to start mammography screening every year for women aged 40-50, and every two years for women over 50. The protocol was amended according to the national cancer registry data and hospital breast cancer reports, which showed that the number of breast cancer cases has significantly increased among women aged 40-50.

This is the first time that research has been conducted in Palestine by a local non-governmental, independent, and trustworthy source. PNIPH, currently managed by the World Health Organization, is planning to further re-assess the national breast cancer screening program in 2020 and examine the impact of the MoH's intervention.

For more information, visit PNIPH at www.pniph.org

Global Overview

Breast cancer is the second most common cancer in the world and the most prevalent type of cancer among women, with an estimated 2 million new cases in 2018. Incidence rates have been increasing in most regions of the world. Between 2008 and 2012, breast cancer incidence increased by more than 20%, while mortality rate rose by 14%. Although incidence rates remain highest in more developed regions, mortality is much higher in less developed countries due to lack of early detection and access to treatment facilities.

(World Cancer Research Fund)