

TheNational

Changing attitudes to save lives

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ABU DHABI // The UAE is among 10 nations taking part in an international campaign to raise women's awareness about breast cancer – one of the country's biggest killers.

The Global Initiative for Breast Cancer Awareness, initially launched earlier this year in Abu Dhabi but expanding to other emirates, will explore areas of research, diagnosis and treatment of the disease.

It is estimated that only 30 per cent of women diagnosed with breast cancer in the UAE are in the early stages of the disease, when treatment is less difficult and chances of cure are higher. Doctors believe one reason for late diagnoses is the cultural taboo surrounding women's bodies.



Dr Jalaa Taher examines X-rays for the National Screening Programme for Women and Children. She is part of a global initiative to promote breast cancer awareness. **Nicole Hill / The National**

"It is well known that women come late for a diagnosis and the problem here is awareness," said Dr Jalaa Taher, the senior programme manager for the initiative and a senior doctor at the Ministry of Health's National Screening Programme for Women and Children.

"They are not aware of the importance of self-examination and we need to change this.

"It is only recently that breast cancer has become an acceptable topic to discuss. There is often a stigma attached to it and people do not want to be associated with it."

Breast cancer accounts for 22.8 per cent of the total number of diagnosed cancer cases in the UAE, making it the country's most common cancer.

In a landmark decision this year, Daman, the national health insurance company, agreed to include breast cancer screening for women aged over 35 in its policies, claiming to be the first company in the Gulf region to introduce such a benefit. Under the new insurance policy, women older than 35 will be covered for annual mammograms as well as clinical and laboratory examinations. The tests will be performed by healthcare providers aligned with Daman.

The Global Initiative project has been established in association with the US-based Susan G Komen for the Cure Foundation, one of the largest networks of breast cancer survivors and activists in the world. Other countries participating in the campaign include Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Ghana, India, Jordan, Ukraine and Mexico.

Abu Dhabi was selected for the campaign launch of the UAE pilot because it runs the national screening programme and has a breast cancer support group.

The campaign hopes to establish how resources should be used in terms of treatment and diagnosis of breast cancer. It will also highlight the importance of early detection of the disease.

Dr Taher is heading a team of five women, who will organise discussions between doctors, nurses, survivors of the disease and other health professionals in and around the capital and in other regions of the emirate to enhance the management of breast cancer services.

All the team members have had experience working with breast cancer.

Dr Taher said there was more awareness among women in the central areas of Abu Dhabi, which is why her team would be working across the emirate.

Her colleague, Dr Walaa Sabih, a community medicine specialist and lactation expert working in the western part of the emirate, said: "We work with some Bedouin people who are often reluctant to take the message on board. They are not fully traditional, but they still have firm ideas about life and their health. It is not easy telling these women they must come for mammograms and start self-examining. It is a very spread-out area, which makes it hard to reach everybody."

Dr Safi el Deen, a former translator in an oncology clinic, is responsible for managing the breast cancer support group in Abu Dhabi. It began in 2003 and has seen an annual rise in the number of women who attend.

"Some women like to come to the support group and others simply like to talk to someone on the phone," said Dr Deen. "We are very happy to provide whatever services the women need.

"One of the hardest parts for those with cancer is the chemotherapy process, and it helps to have others in similar situations to talk to.

"This is one of the reasons I wanted to join this campaign. I have heard women talk about their experiences and I know attitudes are changing."

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Ponnamma Varghese is in remission from breast cancer. **Nicole Hill / The National**