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U.S., Middle Eastern Experts Join in Fighting Breast Cancer

Partnership for breast cancer awareness and research completes first year

By Louise Fenner
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Washington -- When Kendra Woods asked 25 colleagues at America's leading cancer treatment center to serve as advisers for a program to fight breast cancer in the Middle East, she expected about 10 people to agree. Instead, she got all 25 -- plus another person who heard about it.

"I'm just thrilled," said Woods, who oversees international collaborations at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. "These are experts, M.D.s and Ph.D.s, who have volunteered to work with Jordan."

M.D. Anderson is part of the U.S.-Middle East Partnership for Breast Cancer Awareness and Research. The center is working with the King Hussein Cancer Center in Amman, Jordan, to develop research projects, training, exchanges and other programs to improve health care for Middle Eastern women.

Another U.S. partner is Susan G. Komen for the Cure, America's largest grassroots organization of breast cancer survivors and activists. The foundation is training women and medical personnel about the importance of screening and early detection.

The breast cancer partnership, currently in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, soon will expand to Saudi Arabia. It was launched in 2006 by U.S. first lady Laura Bush and is part of the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). (See [related article](#).)

"We have the highest level of support in every country," said Erin Walsh, who oversees women's programs for the department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs.

About 70 percent of breast cancer cases in the Middle East have advanced to stage III or IV (locally advanced or spread to other areas of the body) by the time women see a doctor, according to Susan Brown, manager of health education for Susan G. Komen for the Cure. These stages are more difficult to treat. The situation is similar to that in the United States 25 years ago, when breast cancer was a "taboo subject," Brown said.

In contrast, 80 percent of breast cancers in American women are diagnosed at

earlier stages -- stage I or II -- because of greater awareness and mammography screening, she said. According to the American Joint Committee on Cancer, 87 percent to 98 percent of women whose breast cancer is diagnosed at stage I live for at least five years (five-year survival rates are a standard way of discussing long-term survivals).

Brown conducted awareness training for medical personnel in Amman, women employees at Citibank in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, and female university students in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. She hopes such efforts will encourage Middle Eastern women to talk more freely about breast cancer and inform friends, colleagues and relatives -- and most important, to see a doctor as soon as they detect a lump or other symptoms.

Mammography is available in the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, Brown said, but not enough women take advantage of it.

Ana Teasdale, another trainer, said the Komen group will do more training and customize it for different audiences, including translating additional materials into Arabic. "Some university students in Dubai are very Internet-savvy and are using materials from our Web site," she said.

Komen officials are sharing "intellectual property on what they've done over the past 25 years to raise awareness about breast cancer" in the United States, said Walsh. Without the organization's work, she added, "we would not be where we are today."



Staff from King Hussein Cancer Foundation in Amman, Jordan, at the launch of Breast Cancer Partnership. (Courtesy ICF International)

The M.D. Anderson Center will provide scientific and medical expertise to help determine why women in the Middle East "are developing their [breast] cancer in such high numbers and as young as they have been," Woods told *USINFO*. "What are the genetic reasons? And what are the social reasons" that may prevent women from getting screened for cancer?

"We need to determine why this is occurring, so we can develop therapies to prevent it or prevent recurrence," she said.

In March, Woods traveled to Amman to meet with Dr. Mahmoud Sarhan, director-general of the King Hussein Cancer Center, which she called "one of the shining stars in the Middle East in terms of providing care." She also met with department heads and with Princess Ghida Talal, chair of the center, and Princess Dina Mired, director of the King Hussein Cancer Foundation.

Representatives from the King Hussein Cancer Center visited M.D. Anderson in June and met the experts on the advisory committee -- surgeons, oncologists, radiologists and others. The two institutions also plan to hold a regional breast cancer conference in Jordan in 2008.

The breast cancer partnership is reaching out to the private sector through its

Workplace Awareness Program. Karim Seifeddine of Citibank United Arab Emirates, which is conducting the pilot program, said in an e-mail that trainees in Dubai will begin to train others at United Arab Emirates branches in Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Al-Ain. "We hope to triple the number of trained staff and incorporate the breast cancer training into a wider community campaign driven by the Citigroup Foundation," he said.

The women and medical personnel trained in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates were very enthusiastic, said Teasdale, and some asked "personal questions about their family and sometimes about themselves. It really seems like they heard the message and were willing to share it with immediate family members at least. It was encouraging to see."

Susan G. Komen for the Cure is sponsoring a Global Breast Cancer Advocates' Summit in Budapest, Hungary, September 29-30. [Information](#) on the summit is available on the Komen Web site.

[More information](#) on the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center is available on its Web site.

A [fact sheet](#) on the MEPI breast cancer initiative is available on the State Department Web site.

For more information on U.S. policy, see [Middle East Partnership Initiative](#).

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