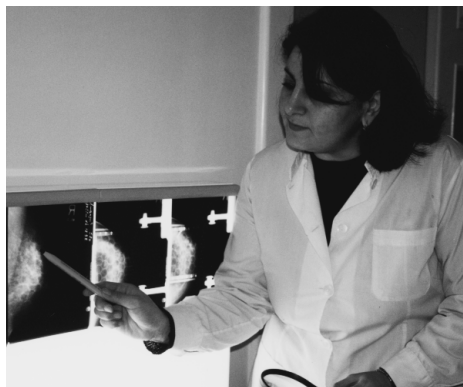


## Breast Cancer Education and Outreach Help Erase Stigma, Give Armenian Women Hope

“The first time I diagnosed breast cancer in one of my patients, I was so upset that I had to excuse myself from the consultation room for a few moments,” recalls Hasmik Davtyan, chief radiologist at the Armenian American Wellness Center (AAWC) in the Armenian capital of Yerevan. “That was 1997. I had just finished medical school and begun practicing. At that time, a breast cancer diagnosis was viewed as a death sentence—not only by patients, but by doctors as well.”



AAWC Chief Radiologist Hasmik Davtyan examines a mammogram, carefully checking for abnormalities that could signal breast cancer.

Because Armenia lacked mammography machines and other modern diagnostic equipment, as well as clinicians trained in their use, the vast majority of women with breast cancer did in fact die because their condition was discovered only after it had progressed too far to be treated effectively, Davtyan explains. That’s why AAWC’s predecessor, the Armenian American Mammography University Center, was established.

“From the very beginning, our goal has been to raise public awareness about the importance of early detection and to provide women with accurate, affordable screening services, as well as referrals to oncologists for treatment,” she continues. When AAWC and its founding organizations—the Virginia-based Armenian-American Cultural Association and the Yerevan-based Women’s Health Care Association—started working

with AIHA in 2000, they were already well-respected for their pioneering efforts to improve women’s healthcare services in Armenia.

Through the Yerevan/Washington, DC, partnership, AAWC was able to expand its work and, to date, has diagnosed 2,459 cases of breast cancer. In 2004 alone, Center staff performed 4,756 mammograms, 3,698 ultrasounds, and roughly 8,000 clinical breast exams. And, as a result of ongoing outreach efforts—including media campaigns, lectures, an annual health walk, and medical missions to rural and underserved communities throughout the country—AAWC has educated countless people about breast cancer, helping women take charge of their own wellbeing while at the same time breaking down the stigma that too often comes with the disease.

For Davtyan and her fellow clinicians, the partnership opened the door to a wide range of professional development opportunities. “Our partnership has been extremely useful because it enabled us to travel to the United States to participate in hands-on trainings covering topics ranging from stereotactic core biopsy procedures and the latest radiology and ultrasound techniques to cytology, pathology, and medical ethics,” she says, noting that AIHA’s regional events also proved both useful and enlightening. “These conferences and workshops allowed us to meet with counterparts from other countries in Eurasia to exchange ideas and information, as well as to become part of a larger network of women’s health specialists. The Learning Resource Center established at AAWC through the partnership helps us keep in contact with these colleagues, so we can consult on difficult cases when necessary and access the latest evidence-based clinical research using the Internet. In this manner, we can assure that the care we are providing remains of the highest quality possible,” Davtyan points out.

Recalling her initial discomfort with telling patients they had breast cancer, Davtyan acknowledges that the exchanges to the United States also helped her change her own attitude toward the disease. “As I became more informed professionally, I real-

Breast cancer is a leading cause of death among women in Armenia, yet most of them—especially those in rural areas—don’t realize the importance of early diagnosis or have access to potentially life-saving screening services. Yerevan’s Armenian American Wellness Center—member institution of AIHA’s now-graduated Yerevan/Washington, DC, partnership—is changing that by raising public awareness about breast cancer and providing state-of-the-art clinical and diagnostic services, including mammograms. Since the Center opened in 1997, it has had nearly 64,000 patient visits and diagnosed some 2,500 cases of breast cancer. Here is the story of AAWC’s chief radiologist; the story of one of the many patients she has treated appears on the other side.

ized that surviving cancer takes more than clinical care, it also requires emotional strength and certain lifestyle changes. I began to look at my work as a partnership between me and my patients and, through experience, came to understand how much that team approach helps people cope,” she explains, noting that this knowledge makes it a bit easier to share bad news because she can now offer women better care and support.

“Today, the mindset of our population is slowly beginning to change—more and more women come to us for annual checkups and their proactive approach to their health means we are catching cancer earlier, when it can be treated more effectively,” Davtyan says. “Patients like Jemma who are brave enough to share their stories with the public contribute greatly to our success because they are living testaments to our prevention and education efforts,” she concludes, saying, “We’ve helped many women win their battle with breast cancer these past eight years and their families, friends, and neighbors see these survivors and are now coming to realize that breast cancer does not have to be the death sentence they once thought it was.”

For more information on AIHA, visit [www.aiha.com](http://www.aiha.com).



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## Early Detection, Prompt Treatment Help Yerevan Woman Survive Breast Cancer

When 59-year-old Jemma Zadowyan first felt a strange, prickling sensation in her breast, she was immediately fearful. She couldn't see anything or feel a lump, but she was worried—her sister Svetlana had died of breast cancer a mere four weeks earlier. Not wanting to give voice to her dread, she hesitated to tell her family. She didn't want them to be concerned about her.



PHOTO: SUZANNE E. GRINNAN

Jemma (center), with her daughters Hasmik and Shushan, won her battle with breast cancer thanks to the early diagnosis and treatment she received at Yerevan's Armenian American Wellness Center.

"My sister was treated at the Armenian American Wellness Center (AAWC) and I knew that the doctors there were very professional and kind, so I arranged for a consultation," Jemma recalls, explaining that when she told her husband how she had been feeling he insisted that she go. She traveled to the Center from her home on the outskirts of Yerevan and was overjoyed when, after being examined by the physicians, she was told that she did not have cancer. "I was so happy. It felt like I got my life back," Jemma says, noting that Hasmik Davtyan, AAWC's chief radiologist, said she had fibroids. Given her family history of breast cancer, the doctor stressed the importance of monthly self-examinations and frequent check-ups.

After Jemma returned home, she followed Dr. Davtyan's advice and kept close watch on her condition. Although she felt fine most of the time, that same "pins and needles" feeling came back periodically.

Four months later, she felt it again for almost two weeks straight. "I thought of my sister, whose cancer was diagnosed when the tumor had already progressed so far as to be untreatable, and I knew I had to take responsibility for my own life," Jemma acknowledges. "I told my husband and he took me to the Center that very day."

During that second visit Jemma had another mammogram, but this time Dr. Davtyan saw something suspicious. "After looking at the x-ray, the doctor decided to perform an ultrasound. I watched her scan the monitor very carefully and I could tell something was not right," Jemma explains. "I looked at the monitor, too, trying to see any little spot that could be a sign of cancer. I asked her what she saw and she pointed out a cluster of tiny black pinpoint spots and what looked like crystals surrounding them. When she told me that she had observed a similar pattern in my sister, my heart sank. I kept thinking 'I'm lost, I'm lost.' I took care of my sister at home while she was fighting her cancer and I saw what it did to her—what it did to all of us," she admits.

Despair gripped Jemma for several moments and Dr. Davtyan did her best to comfort her. "Then my will to fight took over. I realized that I did not have to share my sister's fate just because I shared her blood. We caught my cancer as it was just forming whereas hers was discovered too late," Jemma points out, noting that the doctor arranged for more tests, including a needle aspiration. It was then that the cancer diagnosis was confirmed. She went to the oncology center for surgery the next day and then underwent a course of radiation therapy.

That was six years ago. "Since then, I've been taking Tamoxifen to prevent any recurrence," Jemma says, noting that her experience clearly illustrates that a diagnosis of breast cancer does not have to be a death sentence. "If only my sister's cancer had been detected as early as mine, perhaps she would still be alive. Now, I make sure I check my breasts frequently to see if I notice any changes and I return to the Center for check-ups every six months, if not sooner."

In Armenia and many other countries of the former Soviet Union, a breast cancer diagnosis traditionally carried with it great stigma and shame. Many of the screening tests and treatments taken for granted in the Western world were, until recently, unavailable and most people felt it was better not to know anyway because they viewed cancer as a virtual death sentence. The Armenian American Wellness Center in Yerevan has been working to change this mindset since 1997 by raising awareness about the importance of early detection, offering high-quality diagnostic services and clinical care, and giving women hope. This is the story of one woman who survived breast cancer because of the care she received at the Center; her doctor's story is on the other side.

Jemma has also become a vocal supporter of breast health programs in her country, often speaking at public events and encouraging women to pay attention to their bodies and take greater responsibility for their own health. "For several years now, I have participated in the annual health walk the Center sponsors to raise public awareness, speaking about my experience and the importance of early diagnosis. More and more people come to the event each year," she says, asking, "Why wouldn't they come when nearly every person knows someone whose life has been touched by breast cancer?"

"On a personal level, I can say that I felt surrounded by warmth and caring through all of the stages of my illness. The AAWC staff are so attentive, so kind, that even finding out I had cancer was bearable. Even today, whenever I go there I feel at ease," Jemma says, concluding, "I feel it is my duty to share my story with other women and make them understand that they must be proactive when it comes to their health. Whenever someone tells me that she has noticed something unusual or had a strange sensation, I tell her to go right away to the Center. As a survivor, it is my obligation and I will never lose sight of that."

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