

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.”

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