

## 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."

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



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE