

Media Release

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Low-skilled and Widowed Patients More Likely to Delay Medical Consultation Says Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry Report No.6

Analysis of the latest data collected by the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry (HKBCR) shows that low-skilled workers, widowed patients, or those who have a history of benign breast conditions, such as fibroadenoma, are vulnerable because they tend to delay seeking medical attention even with the onset of symptoms.

One-third of patients delayed seeking medical consultation

To assess the magnitude of delay in seeking medical care from the onset of symptom(s), as well as the factors associated with such delay, HKBCR analysed the data of 2,242 symptomatic patients who had already completed treatment for breast cancer.

In this analysis, consistent with similar studies overseas, “total delay” encompasses (1) “self delay”, i.e. patients’ delay in seeking first medical consultation after the onset of symptoms and (2) “care delay”, i.e. medical systems’ delay in diagnosis or/and treatment.

HKBCR’s finding shows that there was no significant “care delay” but, in contrast, “self delay” was more common: Approximately one-third of patients took more than three months to consult a doctor after the onset of symptoms.

Dr Yau Tsz-kok, member of the HKBCR Steering Committee, expressed concern over the alarming findings on “self delay”, “Delay in seeking first medical attention has significant negative impact on the disease – those who delayed for three or more months are 50% more likely to have larger tumours at diagnosis which are 30% more likely to be node-positive, thus the tumours are 70% more likely to be diagnosed as stage III to IV cancer. The clinical and financial implications point to a bigger, unresolved public health problem in Hong Kong,” says Dr Yau.

Three factors, namely occupation, marital status, and having a history of benign breast conditions, were found to be strongly associated with delays in seeking medical attention. Non-clerical (low-skilled) or labourers were found to be about 60% more likely to delay seeking medical attention than those who were unemployed; patients who were widowed were nearly 240% more likely to delay than those who were unmarried; and patients with previous benign breast conditions had an almost 50% higher tendency to delay.

The most comprehensive report on 12,345 local breast cancer cases

The findings on delay in seeking medical care are released in the Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation (HKBCF)'s sixth "Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry Report" (HKBCR Report No. 6) today. The report presents the statistics of 12,345 breast cancer patients in Hong Kong, and the subsequent analysis derived from there. This figure constitutes about 40% of breast cancer cases recorded¹.

Dr Polly Cheung, Chairman of the HKBCR Steering Committee, pointed out key figures of the HKBCR Report No. 6: 1) the majority of patients (70%) were diagnosed at the age 40-59, with a median of 50 and 2) the following factors continued to be the top three risk factors for breast cancer: 'lack of physical exercise', 'no breastfeeding experience' and 'high level of stress'.

"According to HKBCR Report No. 6, around 85% of the patients accidentally detected their breast cancer, mostly prompted by feeling a painless mass in the breast. The statistics also highlighted the prevalence of stage II breast cancer at diagnosis (40%), a figure which differs from the stage distribution at diagnosis in western countries such as Canada (where population-based breast screening programmes are implemented). In countries such as Canada, stage 0 to I breast cancer prevail. It is noteworthy that the larger the tumour size, the higher the chance of positive nodes, and, consequently, the higher the need for more complicated and intrusive treatment, including mastectomy," said Dr. Cheung.

Speaking at the press conference today, Dr Cheung said, "The latest HKBCR statistics indicate that regular breast screening helps detect breast cancer at an earlier stage. Early detection saves lives. On the other hand, we note the position of Department of Health and the Cancer Expert Working Group that currently there is insufficient local evidence to

¹ It refers the total number of breast cancer cases recorded by the Hong Kong Cancer Registry of the Hong Kong Hospital Authority.

recommend for or against population-based mammography screening for women in Hong Kong. Women should be aware of breast changes and visit doctors promptly if symptoms appear.”

The real cost of delay

Cancer death is now the most common cause of death in our population, more than heart attack or stroke. Breast cancer is the number one cancer affecting women in Hong Kong where the number of cases has tripled since 1993. Breast cancer also accounts for 26% of all cancers in women. Nine new cases are diagnosed each day. In 2011, 552 women died of breast cancer in Hong Kong, making it the third cause of cancer deaths among women that year.

Mrs Eliza Fok, Chairman of the HKBCF said, “Each year, the HKBCF will lend support to about 800 patients and their family members through our Breast Cancer Support Centre and serve around 6,000 persons through our Breast Health Centre. The groups which are significantly associated with delay in seeking medical help are observed to have lower breast health awareness and are ignorant of breast cancer symptoms.”

“Breast cancer is curable if detected early. So be diligent and mindful about breast health. Take notice of any change in our breasts and seek medical advice as soon as possible should you detect any symptoms that persist. Do not easily dismiss symptoms as infections or allergies. They could be signs of breast cancer,” Mrs Fok said.

Take action, prevent delay

While breast cancer may not be preventable, delay is. The HKBCF renews its call for more resources to be devoted to community-wide breast health education, which should emphasize breast cancer symptoms and the need to seek medical advice if unusual changes in the breast persist for a month or more.

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Hong Kong Breast Cancer Foundation (HKBCF) (www.hkbcf.org)

The HKBCF is a non-profit charitable organization inaugurated in March 2005 dedicated to safeguarding the breast health of all women in Hong Kong regardless of their age, nationality, economic status or health condition.

Our ultimate aim is to empower women with the requisite knowledge and readiness to mitigate the threat of breast cancer in their lives. The work of the HKBCF is to provide education, patient support and research to advocate for better breast cancer support and treatment in Hong Kong.

The **HKBCF Breast Health Centre** provides clinical breast examination and quality-assured mammography screening services as well as education talks and information. Services are fee-based but provided free of charge to eligible clients.

HKBCF Breast Cancer Support Centre provides breast cancer patients and their families with access to professionally trained nurses and breast cancer survivors for emotional, information and financial support. It also provides a range of Lymphoedema Care services. Most services are provided free or at nominal fees.

The HKBCF is a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization registered with the Hong Kong Inland Revenue Department (Ref no. 91/7226).

Hong Kong Breast Cancer Registry (HKBCR) (www.hkbcf.org/breastcancerregistry)

The HKBCR is the most comprehensive and representative data collection and monitoring system for breast cancer in Hong Kong. Findings provide insight and evidence to support our advocacy for better prevention, detection and treatment. To date more than 13,000 breast cancer cases recruited from 47 hospitals and clinics are registered with the HKBCR.

Launched in May 2014, **Breast Cancer HK Online** is Asia's first local online breast cancer database and enables access to the HKBCR data by medical professionals to facilitate informed treatment decisions and prognosis assessments.

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