

Journalists' Role in Awareness of Breast Cancer

October has long been linked with pink ribbons and global breast cancer awareness campaigns. In Kenya, communications practitioners and journalists are increasingly on the frontlines of that fight, writing the headlines that could make the difference between an early diagnosis and an unwarranted delay.

Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in women in Kenya. The National Cancer Institute of Kenya has approximated the new cases to be about 6,799 women per year and more than 3,100 annual deaths due to cancer (NCI Kenya). It is the second leading cause of cancer-related death in the country, after cervical cancer (The Star Kenya).

Kenya Breast Cancer Screening and Early Diagnosis Action Plan (2021-2025), in technical partnership with the World Health Organization, will experience rates of early detection increased and screening centers renovated across the country (ICCP Portal). The challenge is that nearly seven in ten diagnoses are advanced stages (III and IV), where there isn't just a shortage of treatment but also cost (ICCP Portal PDF).

Everywhere in the world, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), breast cancer is rising at a pace that health systems cannot keep up with. If action is not taken, it is estimated that in 2050, they will rise 38 per cent and mortality by nearly 70 per cent, mostly in low- and middle-income countries. The same in Kenya, where it is driven by increasing lifestyles, late screening, and scarce diagnostic facilities.

Here is where journalists and communicators enter. What they do connects numbers to context and puts public health in motion. A media story that walks a woman from symptoms to diagnosis can turn numbers into something tangible and provoke response in a way policy briefs can only hope for. Likewise, coverage that speaks to how breast cancer impacts both men and women although not typically reported on — serves to dissect stigma and raise awareness.

Accuracy is necessary in quality reporting nonetheless. Kenya's Ministry of Health structured under its direction leading risk factors such as family history, obesity, alcoholism, and hormonal exposure into its National Cancer Treatment Guidelines. They also explain that Kenyan women are infected with breast cancer at an early stage in life compared to Western countries (WHO Extranet). Reporters enlighten readers by reporting such facts that breast cancer is not some far-off reality but a pending public health concern.

Kenya is also ahead in breast cancer treatment capacity in Africa at a national level of preparedness of 66.7 per cent, significantly higher than the 37 per cent average across the

continent (Business Daily Africa). Media practitioners are however free to use their platforms questioning whether this readiness ever reaches the rural hospitals, and whether facilities for screening ever come to life for the selected most.

Access to information is also a hindrance. A recent study presented on PubMed found that 44.4 per cent of women of reproductive age in Kenya are aware that early cancer diagnosis can be made using breast self-examination (PubMed). That gap can be filled by the media themselves — with ongoing, home-language information on television, radio, newspapers, and the internet.

In conclusion, journalism is not just about delivering facts but rather about serving the public. During Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and each month after, communications professionals are agents of change. Sharing stories that impact and reporting credibly can make awareness a step, and step a hope.

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