

Cover Story



“Being aware & acting early, works wonders” - Lessons from a survivor's diary

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Krisanthi Vitharana and her family was devastated when COVID-19 hit Sri Lanka last year. Yet, unanticipated by many, it was not the culprit of her biggest calamity at the time. Being diagnosed of breast cancer after numerous investigations, Krisanthi had to undergo a life changing breast surgery within days.

Cancer is one of the leading causes of death in Sri Lanka as much as it is worldwide. The current trends of cancer diagnosis and subsequent deaths due to cancer is a toll that is steadily rising around the globe. Alarmingly, breast cancer itself, takes up a significant part of all the cancers and is topmost cancer among women in both the developed and developing world. More than 4000 women are diagnosed of breast cancer in Sri Lanka yearly. With limited resource settings in the health sector of Sri Lanka, significant amount of women are diagnosed of breast cancer in the late stages. This often leads to the need for more advanced and aggressive treatment options, topping up the financial burden for individuals like Krisanthi as well as for the economy of the health sector and the entire country.

As an experienced and influential journalist, who ironically happened to have worked to educate the public on the importance and need for early detection of cancers, Krisanthi was lucky enough to be aware and act early. Knowing that breast cancer was preventable and that it could even be cured completely if detected in the early stages, worked well to her advantage. Being a responsible mother, Krisanthi, together with her daughter, made it a point to keep up with the new trend of being breast aware, and practised the simple technique of self-breast examination (SBE), which took only a matter of minutes, scheduled just once every month.

Detecting symptomatic patients as early as possible is the primary focus of early diagnosis, which improves the outcome of cancer by providing care at the earliest possible stage. On



the other hand, the chances of survival are lowered with the delayed cancer care, which in turn creates serious problems associated with the treatment, including higher costs for treatment. Implementing early diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer, based on the public awareness of early signs and symptoms, the importance of SBE and the necessity to seek medical guidance early, could so far be considered the best and the most feasible option for a country such as Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, it is vital to focus on the awareness of the involved healthcare workers on the need for prompt referral to specialized centers and the knowledge and skills of the healthcare personnel in the grass root level to perform clinical breast examination, as well as educate thousands of their clients, just as Krisanthi, on the procedure of SBE.

Sri Lanka has thus, integrated the said cost-effective and affordable measures into the routine health checks done in well women clinics (WWCs) and healthy lifestyle clinics (HLCs). A cancer early detection centre (CEDC) managed by the National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) is being functioned as a walk-in clinic, which screens for common and preventable cancers such as breast, cervical and oral cancers. A few other CEDCs are currently being implemented with the partnership of the NCCP, intending to make at least one such center available to each province.

Krisanthi's vigilance kept her informed of the services for early detection of common and preventable cancers which are available in Sri Lanka and the ways to approach them. As she figured out certain breast changes during the routine SBE, Krisanthi and her family visited the CEDC situated in Narahenpita, where she was examined thoroughly and referred immediately for further investigations to the National Hospital Sri Lanka (NHSL). Along this referral and management pathway, the diagnosis of breast cancer was made and the most suitable and best possible management for this patient was carried out, with no delay, which saved her valuable life. The World Health Organization stresses upon the key message: *Early detection to improve breast cancer outcome and survival, remains the cornerstone of breast cancer control.*

“This journey is not a bed of roses”. Krisanthi recalled the bitter experience she faced during some of the chemotherapy sessions and the overwhelming mental agony she had to go through, to overcome this hurdle. At the point, the need to have strong mental support, especially from her loved ones and the healthcare team was emphasized. Nevertheless, she won the fight! The story of this exemplary human clearly depicts what every woman should do to fight against breast cancer. Following a brief period of hardships, Krisanthi has taken up the baton once more, to let the world know of her experiences. Her message is clear and simple.

- Breast awareness and early detection can save your life! -