

The knowledge and practice of female employees of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences on screening methods of breast cancer, 2006

Dear Editor,

Breast cancer is the most common malignancy among women, accounting for nearly one in three cancers diagnosed among women, excluding skin cancers.^{1,2} In contrast to the western countries, the common age for this disease in Iran is between 35-45 years.³ The American Cancer Society suggested screening methods for early diagnosis of breast cancer in asymptomatic patients such as monthly self-examination from age 20, clinical breast examination every 2-3 years between 20-40, annual examination in women over 40 and a primary mammography between 35-39 and then, every 1-2 years in 40-44 and annually from 50 years of age.⁴ This study was carried out on employed women of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in Shiraz, Southern Iran. 395 female employees of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences completed a questionnaire consisting of three sections including demographic information, nine questions on the participants' knowledge on breast cancer and the screening methods and five questions about women's practice in order to prevent breast cancer. The participants' knowledge about the incidence of breast cancer fatality, its common incidence, symptoms, time and methods, breast self-examination, mammography and its importance were high, but their level of awareness on breast self-examination for early cancer diagnosis and the importance of the time of clinical examination, mammography complications and breast cancer risk factors was low. 47% of the participants were trained to correct the principles of breast examination, while 31% had not done any breast self-examination and 9.4% had their last self-examination more than one year ago, among whom 13.5% performed it 2-12 months ago and 46.2% in the last two months. 76% of them had never done breast examination and 17.5% had it done only one once by a physician or a midwife about 1-2 years ago, and 6.5% had done it more than two years ago. Among 90.4% of women over 35 years of age, mammography had never been conducted and 7.3% had been examined during the last

1-2 years whereas 2.3% of them had done their last mammography more than two years ago. In all, breast cancer is considered as one of the most important health problems which threatens the women's health and is one of the main research priorities of a country (Table 1). Our participants had a good knowledge on breast cancer which could be due to their job at university with 79% having academic education. Breast self-examination could lead to a reduction in the number of patients when the disease is diagnosed, mammography and clinical examination are recommended.⁵ Mammography, particularly during 50-70 years of age, is considered as the best early diagnostic method.^{5,6} Screening by mammography for breast cancer diagnosis at an early stage has led to a 30% decrease in mortality among 50-65 year-old women.^{7,8} It was found that 76% of women had not referred for clinical breast examination at all, only 9.6% had done mammography, and 31% had never done breast self-examination. The female employees of university as other Iranian women had a poor practice in breast cancer screening, being significant compared with the women in other countries. Regarding the importance of screening, providing training pamphlets for this group of women is recommended.

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SJ Masoumi¹, F Moradi^{2*}

¹Gastroenterohepatology Research Center, Nemaee Hospital, The Office of Vice Chancellor for Financial Affairs, ²The Office of Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

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Table 1: Frequency of Shiraz University of Medical sciences employed women awareness on breast cancer and screening in 2004.

Cases	Correct answer (%)	Incorrect answer (%)
Breast cancer incidence and fatality	84	16
Breast cancer common symptoms	64.9	35.1
Breast cancer risk factors	36	64
Breast self examination effect and importance	17	82
Breast self examination time and method	68.5	21.5
Mammography	78	22
Mammography complications	48.2	51.8
Mammography importance and effect	70.5	29.5
Breast clinical examination	20.3	79.3

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