

# The Pink Ribbon Initiative

October was breast cancer awareness month, and NINA takes a look at the Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation which was launched recently in the city in partnership with Dr Reddy's Foundation for Healthcare Education. It has been informing and educating women about this illness and how to deal with it.



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is not a glamorous illness. And yet, exactly because of this, there is a need to 'normalize' the illness, to promote education and provide information about it for women.

This is what the Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation, established in August this year, is trying to do. The Foundation's CEO, Dr Raghu Ram, is a man motivated in his task because of his personal brush with the illness – his mother was diagnosed with and later successfully treated for it. Realizing that there was a lack of information, counseling and early detection options, he decided to set up the Foundation, named after his mother, in partnership with Dr Reddy's Foundation for Healthcare Education.

The aim is to increase breast awareness among women, and provide free and convenient mammograms through a mobile screening unit. Results from this screening are available within 24 hours, making the waiting time as short as possible. The mobile unit, which was donated by the MKC Roko Cancer Charitable Trust and can screen about 20-25 women a day,

Despite growing awareness about healthcare, proactive prevention and diagnostic methods, especially among the educated, some illnesses are still taboo subjects, too discomfiting to even think about. Breast cancer is one such, where misinformation or no information is the state of affairs. Most women find this subject extremely anxiety provoking, since it combines the dreaded word 'cancer', with sensitive identity and privacy issues. When singer Kylie Minogue was diagnosed with the illness, she dropped almost completely off the public radar during the treatment phase. Breast cancer

was set in motion on October 3 this year. By mid-October, it had not only screened 200 women from various participating organizations, but also detected a case at the early pre-cancerous stage.

Dr Raghu Ram is clear about the benefits of screening. "Eight randomized studies across the world have shown that screening has the potential to reduce mortalities by 30 percent," he says. "In addition to the Foundation which will provide information, and the mobile screening, we are also setting up a Breast Health Center right here at KIMS where consultants, mammogram and ultrasound facilities, counseling and treatment options will be provided under one roof."

The Center will be launched this month and Dr Raghu Ram was enthusiastic as he walked through the site, explaining all the services soon to be made available. "We are targeting the urban, educated woman. Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in women in urban areas – perhaps lifestyle changes play a role here," he says.

The patient who was diagnosed with pre-cancerous results is a doctor herself and says, "I was scared when I heard my results were irregular, but the counseling provided for the whole family reassured us, and the operation was quick and successful. The surgery was very non-invasive, and I have no pain now. Dr Raghu Ram is one of the best. Early detection can save lives. You just have to have the courage to go for regular mammograms." Dr Raghu Ram adds, "I have been practicing in the UK for 10 years, but nothing could compare to the happiness and satisfaction I felt at the successful outcome of this case here in my own city." ❧

## Risk factors

**Although the causes of breast cancer are not known, there are certain well-recognized risk factors. Being a woman and increasing age are the two most important ones, along with**

- Previously diagnosed breast cancer
- Family history of breast cancer
- Early onset of menstrual period (before age 12)
- Late menopause (after age 55)
- Childlessness, or having the first child after age 30
- Long term use of hormone replacement therapy
- Obesity, particularly after menopause

## Breast Cancer Myths and Facts

**Myth:** Most breast lumps are cancers

**Fact:** Nine out of 10 breast lumps are not cancerous. However, it is important to get a definite diagnosis to confirm that the growth is benign

**Myth:** Breast cancer affects only older women

**Fact:** 80 percent of breast cancers occur in women over the age of 50, but the illness can occur at any age and is being increasingly seen in women over the age of 40

**Myth:** Breast cancer cannot occur in men

**Fact:** Since both men and women have breast tissue, a small proportion of men do get breast cancer, although exact figures are not available for India

**Myth:** Birth control pills cause breast cancer

**Fact:** Modern day birth control pills have low doses of hormones and are not associated with an increased risk of getting breast cancer

**Myth:** Breast cancer cannot be detected early

**Fact:** Breast cancer can be detected in its early stages, years before a lump is felt in the breast, and it is treatable and curable if detected early



Photographs: VINAY