

For Immediate Release



AUBMC medical researchers work to unravel the mysteries behind breast cancer in young women

Beirut, Lebanon- 11/10/2013 -More than half of women with breast cancer in Lebanon are under the age of 50, according to new studies by medical researchers at the American University of Beirut Medical Center (AUBMC). This is why health professionals here recommend that women should start screening for breast cancer at the age of 40.

A research team (H. Assi, K. Khoury, H. Dbouk, L. Khalil, T. Mouhieddine, N. El Saghir) has reviewed the epidemiology and prognosis of breast cancer in young women in an article recently published in the Journal of Thoracic Diseases. Authors profiled large samples of breast cancer patients to provide insight on cross-cutting characteristics that identify those most vulnerable to breast cancer. Initial findings have showed that Lebanese women have a median level of risk. Nevertheless, 50 percent of breast cancer patients in Lebanon are below age 50, compared to 25 percent in the United States and Europe. Younger breast cancer patients tend to have more aggressive tumors and require intensive treatment by multidisciplinary teams. In general, long-term use of oral contraceptives, low body mass index (BMI) and a high animal fat diet are associated with increased risk of breast cancer among premenopausal women. On the other hand, decreased physical activity and obesity increase risks of breast cancer in postmenopausal women.

AUBMC researchers have produced a series of papers and discoveries that contribute to the fight against breast cancer in Lebanon and, potentially, around the world. The researchers have been active on several fronts including the profiling of women for susceptible breast cancer traits to management of hospital practices that provide targeted care from across medical disciplines.

While screening protocols in the US and Europe currently call for mammograms starting at the age of 50, in Lebanon, because 50 percent of breast cancer patients are below the age of 50, the recommendation is for annual mammograms starting at the age of 40, noted Dr. Nagi El Saghir, clinical professor of medicine and director of the Breast Center of Excellence of the Naef K. Basile Cancer Institute at AUBMC. “Early detection allows for greater chance of cure and better breast-conserving therapy,” he added.

Another research team led by Dr. Nathalie Zgheib, associate professor of pharmacology and toxicology at AUBMC, decided to look into the genetic properties of Lebanese breast cancer patients to understand the qualities that may cause them to develop toxicities such as infections after taking a well-established form of chemotherapy named docetaxel, commonly used to treat breast cancer.

A third article, which is soon to be published by the United States Journal of the National Cancer Institute (N. El Saghir, H. Assi, K. Khoury, A. Elzawawy, J. Abbas, and T. Eid), looks at the importance, quality and efficiency of “tumor boards” for multidisciplinary management of breast cancer. Tumor boards are meetings of doctors from across disciplines who meet to discuss treatment strategies for patients. The recommendations soon to be published cover how to improve action plans for treatment in order to find specific strategies for each and every patient. The study also looks at smaller hospitals and recommends how a limited number of doctors can meet to provide patients with better care that has tangible results. “The difference these meeting can make can change a treatment plan from a total mastectomy [breast removal], to a partial one,” said El Saghir.

In addition to scientific research, AUBMC doctors have been actively raising awareness about breast cancer to the general public through media-friendly activities, such as the creation of a human pink ribbon on the AUB Green Field on October 5, 2013, in the presence of First Lady Wafaa Sleiman, to mark Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor’s, master’s, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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