Susan G. Komen: Partnering to Improve Global Breast Cancer Outcomes

The theme of this year’s World Cancer Day emphasises that solutions to prevent and treat cancer exist and are reachable. This is surely true in the US and in high-income countries: breast cancer death rates alone have fallen by more than a third since 1990 in the U.S.

However, the advances of high income nations have not translated into significant progress in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). In fact, LMIC are facing what some call a coming cancer tsunami. Globally, 21.6 million cases of cancer are predicted to be diagnosed in 2030 compared with 14 million in 2012, with less-developed regions seeing increases in incidence of up to 60 percent.

Even more striking than the differences in cancer incidence are the inequalities in cancer survival across the globe, particularly for cancers that are preventable or for which effective treatments exist like breast and cervical cancers.

Five-year relative survival for breast cancer that has not spread beyond the lymph nodes is 84% and higher in the U.S. compared to 70% in some places of Central America or 50% in countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Why should where a woman lives determine whether she lives?

Ending breast cancer forever is our mission, a goal we strive toward each and every day. We know we won’t achieve it alone - that’s why we’ve long believed in the power of partnerships. Through our global programs, Susan G. Komen has provided more than $70 million to more than 200 organisations to support scientific research, community health programs and educational efforts in more than 60 countries.

Presently, we are active in more than 30 countries all over the world. We strive to serve as a “bridge” – partnering with international nonprofits, businesses, and Ministries of Health to bring together people and organisations who share our passion.

Our global programs aim to reduce breast cancer deaths by encouraging screening, increasing early detection and ensuring access to quality care and treatment. We work on many levels to give those affected by breast cancer a strong sense of hope, courage and community.

In some countries such as China, Hungary, and The Bahamas our efforts focus on promoting education about cancer and the importance of early detection and early treatment. In Kenya and Tanzania we are focussing on supporting community and primary health care workers by facilitating training aimed at integrating breast self-awareness messaging and clinical breast exams into existing service delivery platforms. And in certain communities of Central America and the Middle East we are supporting efforts to end the stigma of breast cancer.

In sub-Saharan Africa, we partner with Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon (PRRR) to build women’s cancer control on existing healthcare programs - such as those developed to address HIV/AIDS - to add interventions to prevent, screen for and treat cervical and breast cancers.

More recently, we have seen the start of the Global Breast Cancer Alliance, a consortium of breast cancer experts seeking to empower and create an enabling environment for LMICs to downstage breast cancer. The initial outreach of the alliance will be Latin America, where we work with civil society to develop sustainable, local solutions to reduce breast cancer deaths, but there are plans to expand to other regions of the world. The GBCA hopes to provide the framework for advancing cancer control in these regions using defined common goals and evidence based strategies.

Our Komen experience is gratifying, but by no means is it the only effort toward ending the global burden of cancer. Dozens of governments, businesses, cancer organisations, NGOs and advocates work together, every day, through a range of consortia to achieve this goal.

“Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much.”
- Helen Keller
