



Female breast cancer as taboo: Cultural factors and awareness amongst patients and their families in the Philippines

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Abstract

Statistical information from cancer studies show that the Philippines has the highest incidence rate of breast cancer in Asia. Efforts on creating awareness are being spearheaded by the country's health department, local governments, and cancer-interest organizations. Despite these, discussions on the issue remain a forbidden topic among many Filipinos, particularly the patients and their families themselves. This study aims to know the central discourses behind the prevailing treatment of Filipinos on female breast cancer as taboo and the correlation to the slow development of awareness on the illness. A quality circle was conducted on three middle-aged women from General Santos City, southern Philippines. All of the respondents were breast cancer survivors. A discourse analysis on the data figured that there are two central and interconnected discourses hindering the awareness and acceptance of breast cancer: (i) fear and denial due to financial instability, and (ii) folk belief. The researchers suggest that instead of coursing breast cancer treatment budget through the Philippine government's health insurance provider, it should be directly allocated to the country's health services program. They concluded that beyond creating awareness, it is with the accessibility of treatment that the Filipino people will be liberated from the prevailing central discourses on breast and any type of cancer.

Keywords: breast cancer, discourse analysis, Filipino culture, patient, Philippines, public health

Introduction

Among Asian countries, the Philippines has the highest incidence rate and also has one of the highest mortality rates for female breast cancer (Youlden et al., 2014), with up to one-third of women having family history of the said illness (Liede et al., 2003). Additionally, the Philippines also has the highest age-adjusted rate in the Asia-Pacific region with 0.99 per 100,000 men (Ly et al., 2013). While incidence rates are almost twice as high in developed countries, there is a disparity of 8% to 15% in the mortality rates with the developing (more specifically, low income) countries as only less than 25% of their population have access to cancer treatment such as radiotherapy (International Atomic Energy Agency as cited in Torre, et al., 2015).