Exploring how awareness and experiences of Malawian breast cancer patients influence access and use of breast health services

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Background

- Diagnosing breast cancer early is important to improve patient outcomes, however early detection is rare in resource-limited settings like Malawi
- Malawian women with breast cancer commonly have long symptom durations, are diagnosed at young ages, and have poorly differentiated tumors
- Complex individual and social contextual factors may play a role in women’s cancer behaviors

Aim

The objective of this study was to explore how Malawian women were diagnosed with breast cancer and what influenced their decisions and ability to access breast cancer care. We propose a conceptual framework based on women's experiences to understand delay in sub-Saharan Africa.

Methods

- We purposively recruited 20 breast cancer patients at different phases of cancer care from the oncology clinic of a national teaching hospital in Lilongwe from April to August 2014
- Local research assistants conducted interviews in Chichewa using a semi-structured guide, then transcribed recordings verbatim and translated them into English
- We analyzed the transcripts in Atlas.ti initially using an inductive approach to identify themes emerging from the transcripts, then organized the codebook using the social contextual model
- Two coders independently applied the final codebook to all transcripts and examined code frequencies and co-occurrences to identify overarching themes

Table 1. Characteristics of breast cancer patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25-40 years</td>
<td>9 (45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-55 years</td>
<td>4 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56+ years</td>
<td>7 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>15 (75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single/divorced</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>3 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>18 (90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lilongwe</td>
<td>12 (60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside of Lilongwe</td>
<td>8 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No formal schooling</td>
<td>5 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some primary school</td>
<td>8 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some secondary school</td>
<td>7 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electric in house</td>
<td>5 (25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular source of income</td>
<td>8 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roof type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron sheet roof</td>
<td>11 (55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass thatched roof</td>
<td>9 (45)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Occurrence of coded text units from key themes in interviews with Malawian breast cancer patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Concept</th>
<th>Text units</th>
<th>Illustrative quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of awareness</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>&quot;I have never heard about breast cancer. I have just learned now that there is also breast cancer...I was just hearing that there is cervical cancer but I did not know about breast cancer or what it looks like. I am seeing now that breast cancer looks like this.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other explanation for symptom</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>&quot;I just thought it was one of the boils which people have, they remove the puss from them...Then I started to suspect that maybe it was not just a boil because it felt hard...[and had] a type of pain that made me restless. I could not wear anything. I had no peace.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptom prompts action</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>&quot;At first, [the] top of the breast became very hard. But it was not painful. So I was just saying, maybe that is what happens after menopause. But the other one was ok. I liked that a lot for a year. But still I was not feeling well no matter how much medication I took. Then I noticed that the breast had started swelling. That was when I asked my friends, 'Look at my breast, is this what happens after menopause?'&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cancer-related experiences</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>&quot;I heard that there is this problem...I saw a person in the village. Her breast was removed...I heard it is a dangerous disease. And my friend whose breast was removed, she is not alive. In the same year when her breast was removed, she died.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional remedies, witchcraft</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>&quot;The first thing I did, there was one of my relatives, who told me that I should be heating a cooking stick and put the cooking stick on my breast...The fire was a part of treatment...I did not see any change. That was why I just decided to come to the hospital.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral delay</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>&quot;When I went there again and explained to them, they just gave me medication. I took the drugs. They said when there is no change I should come back. I went there three visits. I was just given drugs. Now on my fourth visit, I was given a referral.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provider lack of knowledge delay</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>&quot;They were just telling me it's a boil. They were giving me medication, injections. The lump was not going away. So I went and told them, 'It is not going away, it is just getting bigger'. So they told me, 'Go back home so that the boil can break. Do not remove the pus at home. You should come here so that we see it.' So when it got bigger and showed the signs of breaking, I went and said, 'Have you seen how it is now?' That was when they said, 'Go!'&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medication availability</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>&quot;But the problem was when we came here for treatment, when we went to the pharmacy to receive medication, some medications were not available. [They said,] 'No. This medication is not available.' But we saw that after four months, we started receiving medication normally.&quot;</td>
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</tbody>
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Findings

- Malawian patients were largely unaware of breast cancer which led to many women experiencing long delays between symptom onset, seeking help, being diagnosed, and initiating treatment.
- Help-seeking behaviors and access to care were influenced by individual, interpersonal, health care provider, and health system level factors.
- To our knowledge, this is the first study to develop a framework for understanding breast cancer help-seeking behaviors to improve early detection in sub-Saharan Africa.

Significance

- A comprehensive approach to improving early detection of breast cancer in sub-Saharan Africa is needed and must increase public awareness of signs, address misconceptions about risk factors, promote availability of effective prevention for working-class, multilingual populations.

References and Acknowledgements


We gratefully acknowledge the breast cancer patients at KCH for their participation, Selina Thembulumba and Olivia Yambe for their interviewing and data collection contribution, and Anna Miller for her qualitative coding assistance.

Financial Support: Ms. Kohler is supported by the UNC Cancer Care Quality Training Program (R2S 1A163139). This work was also funded by the UNC Hopkins Morehouse Tulane Fogarty Global Health Fellows Program (D5U 7T000040).