



EARLY DETECTION: To detect breast cancer in the early stages, women should check for lumps or any abnormalities in breast tissue by doing a self-examination at least once a month, and by having a mammogram every three years from the age of 40.

Cancer survivor is now a 'bosom buddy'

Heidi Bresler has had the all-clear for two years, now she helps others with the same disease, writes **SIPOKAZI FOKAZI**

WHAT started as a self-pampering foot massage at a reflexology session turned into a life-changing experience for breast cancer survivor Heidi Bresler of Pinelands.

It was in 2006 when Bresler was alerted by a reflexologist to the fact that her liver seemed to be taking strain. She was advised to stop taking her contraceptive pill and to see her gynaecologist who recommended a mammogram.

"The mammogram results came out fine, but there was a little area in my breast tissue that looked suspicious, but it was nothing like a lump. A biopsy was done and it came back negative," said the 36-year-old.

"The gynaecologist suggested I come back a year later. I did. The tissue was still there, but the biopsy remained negative."

Two years later, in September 2008, when breast specialists decided to operate to remove the "suspicious tissue", they found cancerous cells.

"When I was told that I had breast cancer, I was not too shocked," said Bresler. "The news sunk in later. At midnight on that day I cried hysterically. I knew the experience was going to be horrendous."

Bresler was given a few treatment options. One was to either have a mastectomy on one breast, another was to wait and see what happens after six months and another was to have a large section of her breast removed.

She opted for a double mastectomy. "This was a challenging decision. Here I was about to lose my femininity and sexuality at such young age. Breast cancer is probably the only cancer that robs a woman of her femininity. Going through chemotherapy doesn't only result in loss of hair, but it puts you on early menopause. And for a woman not having breasts is such a big deal. But, I had to put all of that aside and concentrate on my health.

"Having cancer made me realise that

my womanhood is not in my hair or boobs. Those features don't define me anymore. For me, staying positive and surrounding myself with people that are supportive and make me happy are the only things that keep me going," she said.

Almost two years of being cancer-free, Bresler, who works as a mental facilitator for an early intervention programme for infants with hearing impairment, finds time to help those with breast cancer.

She is a volunteer in the Bosom Buddies programme, a project of the Breast Health Foundation, which provides emotional support to men and women affected by breast cancer at the point of diagnoses, during treatment and thereafter.

Run by cancer survivors, the "buddies" create a loving and compassionate environment in which they support not only breast cancer patients, but also their families and friends.

October is Breast Cancer Month, and both the government and non-governmental organisations use the month to highlight the experience of those living with this often debilitating disease.

Professor Justus Apffelstaedt, head of the Breast Clinic at Tygerberg Hospital, said the incidence of breast cancer in the Western Cape had increased dramatically in the past decade with the public and private healthcare sectors seeing between 1 000 and 1 200 new cases every year.

Apffelstaedt said the province's breast cancer cases were the highest in the country, with Groote Schuur and Tygerberg breast clinics alone seeing between 900 to 1 000 new cases every year.

The number of patients seen at Tygerberg had trebled in the past 10 years, from about 140 new cases a year to about 420 this year.

Even more concerning, he said, was the level of advancement of cancers by the time patients presented themselves at clinics. He said a large number of cancers seen by these clinics was so advanced that

successful treatment was a challenge.

"The advancement of the disease has not changed over the past four years. A lot of women present very late when the cancer is advanced. These figures show that education about breast cancer doesn't translate into health-seeking behaviours."

But Louise Turner, head of the Breast Health Foundation, said though early detection remained the key to successful treatment of breast cancer, many women left treatment until very late.

The problem was exacerbated by the long, bureaucratic process at clinics and primary health-care centres which often meant patients had to wait for up to 10 months before being referred to specialist breast clinics for a proper diagnosis.

"The standard process facing most of these women is to go to the clinic first, then go to a bigger clinic, then a secondary hospital before they get to tertiary services. By the time they get there, the cancer is so advanced that little can be done to reverse the process or save the breast," she said.

Apffelstaedt said some women were misdiagnosed or "pushed from pillar to post" at primary care level.

He said misdiagnosis was symptomatic of a lack of expertise at primary care level, coupled with the shortcomings of pathology services that were understaffed.

Another weakness in the country's public health system was the lack of access to screening services for breast cancer.

Cancer Association spokeswoman Lucy Balona said one in 29 women in South Africa was diagnosed with breast cancer.

"We need to do much more education in getting the message across. What's even more concerning is the fact that more and more young women are being diagnosed."

Women can check for lumps or any abnormalities in breast tissue by doing a self-examination once a month during ovulation, and by having a mammogram every three years from the age of 40.

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