

PINK CONNECTION

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Dr Ushalakshmi

Even though I am a doctor, I missed the first signs of cancer...

Dr V Shantha

An icon of cancer care

Telangana heritage

Ikat

The Indomitable Dr Ushalakshmi

Women who are the pivot around which the family revolves never pay attention to their own health. Which is in itself is unforgivable. But what happens when a gynaecologist herself does not take care of her body? **Lakshmi Prabala** meets one such woman – Dr P Ushalakshmi – who didn't let dreaded cancer deter her but in fact inspired a major breast cancer awareness movement across Andhra and Telangana



Kamal Kiran

My disease is not a secret anymore", says Dr P Ushalakshmi bluntly. "I had breast cancer but as a survivor, not as a woman or a gynaecologist, I was filled with a desire to educate women about breast cancer and ensure they learn how to prevent it. It is a blessing to be a survivor. Now, I hope to arm other women with the awareness," she says.

When her life had turned upside down after her cancer diagnosis, not only did she find strength and resilience to battle the disease, she also saw an opportunity to educate and empower other women to detect breast cancer early.

An MBBS graduate from Guntur Medical College, Dr Ushalakshmi Kumari had developed a keen interest in medicine as a child and always dreamt of becoming a doctor. In her time, it was uncommon for women to pursue a post-graduation but Ushalakshmi went on to complete her masters at Vizag Medical College with her father's encouragement. Dr Ushalakshmi was a practising gynaecologist at Niloufer Hospital and a professor at Osmania Medical College before she started her private practice in 1983. She retired eventually in 2007.

It was in 2002, her life changed forever when she went to London on a holiday with her husband Dr PV Chalapathi Rao to spend time with their son and his family.

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Dr Ushalakshmi felt some uneasiness in her right breast one day and brought it to her doctor son's notice. Her son, Dr P Raghuram lost no time in consulting a breast specialist. A lump was found and three days later, their worst fears were confirmed when the biopsy results tested positive for malignancy.

A cancer patient's initial reaction is usually one of disbelief but in Dr Ushalakshmi's case it was also tinged with guilt. "I was in a state of shock, and so was my entire family. I felt bad that being a doctor and a gynaecologist, at that, I had not taken

care of my own body. I was upset that I used to warn my patients and friends to have regular check-ups and I had not followed my own advice", she recollects.

Even though the condition was diagnosed early, multiple points were seen. The doctor advised a mastectomy to be on the safe side. A trip to India might have delayed the treatment, so the family decided to have the surgery in London.

"I was worried at first but soon I shifted focus to recovery. I was eager to get rid of the cancer in my body at the earliest", says Dr Ushalakshmi. It did cross her mind that her body might get disfigured after the procedure but she quickly resigned herself to it knowing that it was an integral part of the treatment. Henceforth, she resolved to prioritise health over everything else in her life.

"I was anxious to return to India and get on with my life. I had understood the importance of regular mammograms and I was impatient to make my patients aware of it too," she points out.

Since Dr Ushalakshmi had the surgery in the UK, she benefitted from their medical care. An important step in their approach was to educate cancer

patients about the different aspects of breast cancer, across the stages of treatment.

“A breast care nurse looked after me in England and gave me a series of booklets published by Breast Cancer Care, which I found useful during the different stages of my treatment from the diagnosis to recovery. These booklets kept me better-informed, better-prepared and helped me to feel in control. In a simple, and easy to read format, they contained relevant information pertaining to breast cancer – what to expect, how one may react and the options available. I must confess, even though I was a doctor who knew about the disease, I had gained a lot of confidence by reading these booklets. I learnt many things for the first time. It proved so helpful that it was not necessary to question the doctor too. My fears were put to rest”, she confesses.

After her experience with medical care in the UK, it was but natural for Dr Ushalakshmi to compare it with treatment methods in India. Many years later, in 2007 when her son, Dr Raghuram returned to Hyderabad she requested him to create a similar facility for breast cancer patients in the city. In collaboration with the Breast Care Centre UK, and Dr Reddy’s Foundation for Healthcare Education, The Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation was founded and one of the first things they did was print and distribute 100,000 copies of the same booklets published by Breast Cancer Care.

On her return to India after her surgery, Dr Ushalakshmi had continued her chemotherapy at NIMS. She took leave for six months and underwent therapy with her husband and mother standing firmly by her side. Her daily routine involved sufficient exercise, in the form of walking for an hour or yoga, mainly to keep weight under control. The only dietary restriction she followed was to avoid food rich in fat.

After six months of therapy, she returned to work without any difficulty. “It has been 12 years since

my initial diagnosis and I never miss my follow-up tests even today. Except for the regular ailments that come with age, like knee pains or joint aches, I lead a healthy life. I am retired now, but keep busy reading about the latest advances in breast cancer treatments. Of course, like most grandmothers I immensely enjoy my time with my grandsons Sai Ram and Krishna Sai,” she says beaming.

Significantly, chances of recovery for a cancer patient improve if they maintain a positive attitude towards life, and when they have the support of family and friends, she says. A cancer patient needs to steer clear from negativity. The care-givers should keep them positive and cheerful and dispel their fears by educating and encouraging them.

Dr Ushalakshmi cannot stress enough on how important it is for a woman to take care of her own health. “The woman is a pillar of strength but she gets so caught up in caring for her family that she tends to neglect herself. Since she plays a pivotal role in the household, her health and well-being are crucial. It is important for her (and her husband) to ensure she gets a mammogram and pap-smear every year. After all, it doesn’t cost more than a saree! But it can go a long way in the detection of breast cancer or cervical cancer. Unlike ovarian cancer or pancreatic cancer or other types of cancer, these two can be detected early. And that itself gives a woman a greater chance of survival.”

Rural women also need to be included in this circle of information on breast cancer, says Dr Ushalakshmi. “One should reach out to rural women as they may not have the means, or access to knowledge and medical facilities. Since it is about a sensitive part of a woman’s body, they may be unwilling to talk or hear about it. The challenge in rural areas is to speak their language, win their confidence and help overcome the taboo.”

The Ushalakshmi Breast Foundation had partnered with the Andhra Pradesh Government to train health workers who would then visit each

house, gain their trust, educate the women and conduct palpation of their breasts. The booklets were printed in Telugu, for which the Foundation made a significant donation.

In September 2007, Dr Raghuram, relocated to Hyderabad from the UK after ensuring his family was comfortable with the move. Being an only child, he was deeply affected by his mother’s battle with breast cancer. He was also concerned about the lack of information available to women affected with breast cancer in India. He went on to start the Breast Cancer Foundation and a Breast Cancer Centre and added his mother’s name to both the initiatives to honour her spirit in the fight against breast cancer. His main intention was to generate awareness in as many ways as possible.

While Dr Raghuram was in the UK, his friend’s wife too had breast cancer. When his friend visited Punjab, he designed a bus equipped with an ultrasound scan, mammogram and along with a clinical exam to help diagnose breast cancer. This bus was driven down to Hyderabad and around 950 women across organisations, offices and colleges were screened for breast cancer free of cost. The Ushalakshmi Breast Cancer Foundation has tried to reach out to as many people as possible through different mediums like TV shows, newspapers articles, and by roping in celebrities to campaign for the cause.

In 2009, the Pink Ribbon walks were started and held on the first Sundays of October every year in Hyderabad. At 6 am, people assemble at KBR Park and walk for 2 km. This is to create awareness about breast cancer, honour survivors and also underline the importance of exercise in breast cancer prevention. In 2013, Pink Ribbon Walks were also flagged off in Vishakhapatnam.

On how her life has changed after breast cancer, Dr Ushalakshmi says that she realised that we tend to take life for granted and forget how “precious” it is. Today, she is grateful for the second chance, and not a day goes by when she doesn’t feel thankful for surviving this life-threatening disease. ■