

Montserrat's Mammogram Programme on Stream

By Cathy Buffonge

Breast cancer is a common cause of death worldwide, including the Caribbean, and this has caused grief to many families. However, experts say, this does not have to be so. According to Clinical Specialist Sonographer and Mammographer, Sonia Charles, techniques like breast self examination, clinical breast exam (performed by a doctor or nurse) and screening mammogram can save lives by detecting cancer at a very early stage where it can be successfully treated, thus adding worthwhile years to life.

Ms Charles and her diagnostic imaging company Caribscan have been the driving force in a voluntary fundraising drive to give women in Montserrat the opportunity of having free screening mammograms at the Belmont Clinic in neighbouring island Antigua.

What is a mammogram? It is a special X-ray of the breasts, which can detect many problems, from a simple lump to a possibly cancerous growth. The most modern and effective mammograms are called digital mammograms. Mammography is done using a special type of X-ray machine, however the purchase and maintenance of this equipment is out of range for many smaller territories.

For Montserrat therefore, this project will make a real difference, since mammogram is not available on the island. By special arrangement with between Caribscan and Dr Eumel Samuel Radiologist, at the Belmont Clinic, digital screening mammograms are being offered to women resident in Montserrat at half price, with the remaining half being paid for from the fund, resulting in a free service.

Ms Charles, a Montserratian professional based in the UK, visits Montserrat several times a year to perform and report on ultrasound scans. Ultrasound is a great diagnostic tool, she says, but not a substitute for mammogram. She is passionate about getting as many women in Montserrat as possible to have mammograms under this project, and pours her energy and sometimes her own resources into making a success out of it. October is known internationally as Breast Cancer Awareness Month, with stress on the critical importance of early detection.

In 2009 the first fund raising event was held, in the form of a gala dinner and auction of local art work. This was followed in 2010 by a fundraising Walkathon, named the Pink Ribbon Walk (the breast awareness logo). The monies collected were used to set up the Mammogram Fund, which will eventually become a full scale charity. Funds also came from as far away as Toronto, Canada, where Montserratian nursing administrator Mary Glavassavich of

Sunnybrook Hospital raised funds for this cause. And recently at a special ceremony, seventy women were presented with vouchers to access this free service.

An arrangement was also made, through the Ministry of Communications and Works, for cut-price ferry tickets between Montserrat and Antigua, so that this and their departure tax is all the women have to pay. Several women have taken advantage of this service, and every Saturday a group of twenty or more is expected to travel together to Antigua, where the Belmont Clinic provides free transportation to and from the clinic.

The next fund raiser is another Pink Ribbon walk on November 5th, and from this it is hoped that the remaining women who have registered can be given vouchers for this service. Names are still being taken, on the understanding that those first registered get first preference.

In addition to having a mammogram every two to three years, women should examine their breasts monthly, and can get more information on this from their health care provider or their district clinic. Women should also have their breasts examined by a doctor or nurse once a year, or more often if there is any doubt. It must be emphasized that every lump found is not necessarily cancer, in fact the majority may not be cancer at all. But it's important to know, so that steps can be taken to investigate and deal with the problem, resulting in better health and much longer quality lives.

Comments:

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