



The story behind the Queen Sirikit Centre for Breast Cancer, its philosophy and outreach projects.

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Abstract

To honour Her Majesty the Queen's special birthday, the editorial board asked if an article could be written about the work of the Queen Sirikit Centre for Breast Cancer, based at King Chulalongkorn Memorial Hospital, Thai Red Cross Society. The centre was built up from the ambitious idea of creating a centre of excellence for the treatment of all women, but primarily the underprivileged. The main barrier to the project's fruition was the lack of initial funding. The article charts the story of the centre's humble beginnings to its present status, as an international 'centre of excellence', in clinical care and research. It also examines the outreach work to educate Thai women about breast cancer at a national level, and its pioneering annual breast cancer awareness campaign. The piece also discusses the centre's breast and cervical cancer screening programme in the slums of greater Bangkok.

Keywords: goals of QSCBC, outreach projects

'I would like it to be a sanctuary for women in need.'

Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, Patron.

Her Majesty the Queen graciously opened the Queen Sirikit Centre for Breast Cancer (QSCBC) in 2005 as Patron, accompanied by HRH Princess Sirindhorn. The opening came after many years of planning, building a team and fundraising by Dr Kris Chatamra MBBS [London], FRCS [England], MD [London]. After returning to Thailand after 30 years in the UK, as a senior clinician and internal examiner at the Royal College of Surgeons, England, he saw the need for a facility designed specifically



for cancer patients, primarily breast cancer patients and open to all women, especially the underprivileged.

The unit was based at King Chulalongkorn Hospital, a government rather than a private hospital, to ensure that all women could have access to care. A multi-disciplinary cohesive approach to treatment, where the patient is the centre of a care plan, rather than being passed along a line of physicians and surgeons, was a core philosophy. Breast conservation for breast cancer patients, was another innovation and key policy pioneered by Dr Kris Chatamra at the centre: fighting surgically to save a woman's breast rather than automatic mastectomy. Funds were raised to send the doctors and nurses of the QSCBC team abroad to do postgraduate training and to absorb the most modern ideas in breast cancer. Once a team and the philosophy were established, the funds were gradually raised to buy the best and carefully researched, equipment available. The centre is under the auspices of the Thai Red Cross Society, which has a very heavy burden of responsibilities in many areas, and despite tremendous support financially, in order to create what is known in the medical field as 'a centre of excellence', Dr Kris Chatamra had to be proactive, if his vision was to be achieved. The final phase was to move the team and equipment under one roof, namely the Queen Sirikit Centre for Breast Cancer, which now provides inpatient facilities for 80 patients and outpatient treatment in one centre.

The latest most modern equipment installed is a new MRI machine dedicated to breast cancer. The machine is designed with extreme sensitivity and specificity for lesions in the breast. It differs from digital mammography and ultrasound but compliments their findings. MRI dedicated for breast cancer measures the dynamic physiology, rather than anatomy of the breast. The image shows, for example, the normal and abnormal blood flow into a tumour, so that the pathological changes of breast tissue can be monitored. This is the most exciting new development in breast cancer and it is offered to patients who are selected ethically by the medical team at the centre. The price per patient at the QSCBC will be radically reduced. Donations will be sought to help the very poor women the centre serves in the slum communities in greater Bangkok and from around the country.



Dr Kris Chatamra was keen to carry out research and teach young doctors and nurses. Funds were raised to invite leading international clinicians and researchers to offer free seminars, open to any doctor or nurse across the country, so that the best teaching was available to all. International collaborative research relevant to Thai cancer patients was started. Patient support groups were built up to work along side the first ‘breast cancer specialist nurses’, trained at post-graduate level in the UK and the States. Their job is to support new patients through every part of the treatment from diagnosis onwards with factual information and vital psychological support. Quality of care and the treatment of the whole woman are important factors in the QSCBC approach; to this end the centre created a prayer room where patients with faith in their chosen religion could spend quiet time. The walls of the centre are covered with four hundred donated paintings and photographs; live music is also regularly played, to give patients the most positive environment.

Men, women and children are all treated at the QSCBC. Some patients come forward too late for diagnosis and consequently pass away. The final stage of the plan to support the QSCBC, is to build a hospice village for the underprivileged, to convalesce or pass away without pain and with dignity. It is hoped that it will be a self-sufficient community, growing a lot of its own rice, fruit and vegetables, on the land already donated in Minburi. It is also hoped that it will be a support to the local community’s economy.

One of the national initiatives of the Queen Sirikit Centre for Breast Cancer, is a photographic campaign to educate the Thai public about breast cancer and indeed, cervical cancer. Breast cancer is the leading cancer killer of women in Thailand, with cervical cancer being a close second. A trend is emerging, which shows that breast cancer in Thailand may be a younger woman’s disease, compared to the average age of onset in the West. The aim of the campaign is to dispel the myths about breast cancer and cervical cancer, promoting the main message ‘early detection may save your life’. Each photograph has a written message that is informative about cancer, dispelling myths and giving facts. The imparted information is based upon the questions most asked by patients. The hope is to decrease the fear of breast and cervical cancer that



Figure 1: QSCBC Ambassadors

so many women associated with this disease and to empower women to be proactive about their health, wherever possible.

The photographs represent men and women from every part of Thai society, from the slum communities, business women, Buddhist and Christian nuns, to film stars. Anyone who sees the photographs will be able to relate to the chosen ambassadors. The campaign also includes the women diplomats who represent their countries in Thailand, namely for 2012, H.E. The Ambassador of the United States of America, H.E. The Ambassador of Argentina and H.E. The Ambassador of Switzerland. The campaign also includes foreign business women who also make up Thai society and are not ex-patriots. Every age of breast cancer ambassador is represented, to appeal to every woman in Thailand. The campaign mission is to clearly state that breast cancer can affect any woman.

The campaign is the first of its kind in Thailand and it is not commercial in any way. The photographs do not represent a company or carry a logo. The ambassadors are not paid and they offer their support as a gift and service to Thai society. This is the fifth year of the awareness campaign and each year has shown greater success with the photographs reaching a wider audience.

The QSCBC gives out the photographs on a cd-rom at no charge, to hospitals, factories, buses, train and underground networks, shopping malls, offices, anywhere where the photos can be printed out cheaply and then displayed in public areas. The campaign is seen as a service to Thai women. Partnering with the media is also a huge help in showing the public this campaign and spreading accurate information about these two cancers, through the outlets of press and television.

Another initiative the Queen Sirikit Centre for Breast Cancer has instigated is an outreach project, which reaches into twenty different communities within the slums of Greater Bangkok. This project offers free education, screening and treatment for breast and cervical cancer, to women, in the poorest slum communities, who have no access to this type of care. The most modern breast and cervical diagnostic tests, namely, digital mammography, ultrasound and cervical PAP smears, are given to the women most in need of financial help. If necessary, the women are treated free and they



Figure 2: Teaching women in the communities.



are also followed up for further assessments. All the funding is raised privately by the QSCBC. The women are screened in groups of 100 as the project rotates around the various slum communities every 3 months. Women who may be in need in the interim months, before the team's next visit, are offered immediate help. 2000 Baht pays for one digital mammography, ultrasound, medical examination and history. 500 Baht pays for one cervical PAP smear [approx. 50 pounds sterling in total].

Following an initial talk about breast and cervical cancer in the women's home slum community, the women can register to come into the QSCBC, for the diagnostic tests. The women are given a short questionnaire to assess their knowledge of breast and cervical cancer before the teaching session and again afterwards, to check that they truly understand what they have been taught. Prizes are offered for the best results and other donated gifts are given, ensuring that the essential message of 'early detection of breast and cervical cancer' is understood, in a relaxed, positive and non-threatening



Figure 3: Magician entertaining the children while their mothers are being screened.

way. If a woman cannot read or write, volunteers, who are breast cancer survivors themselves, come along side the community women to assist them in filling out the test forms. The presence of the breast cancer survivors is also the best example to the communities, that a good quality of life, post breast cancer, is indeed possible, thereby dispelling all their engrained negative preconceptions. The outreach project is open to all women in communities, whatever their religious belief, and reaches across Greater Bangkok from the slums next to the port to the homes built on the city's rubbish tips.



Figure 4: A Typical slum house.

All ages of women are educated about cervical and breast cancer, but the emphasis is to also alert younger women, particularly teenagers about the need to be proactive about screening. Women over 40 years are given breast and cervical tests and those under 40, who are sexually active, receive only PAP smears, unless there are presenting breast symptoms. Women who have hidden their advanced symptoms are also encouraged to come forward for treatment. The project aims to overcome feelings of fear, shame or embarrassment, as barriers to seeking treatment or screening. Religious beliefs may be a deterrent to some women, who cling to the idea that they deserve breast or cervical cancer because of their negative acts in previous lives. The team will always try and persuade a woman that because the project is present in her community and is offering help, then she surely deserves the best care available. Other women, on a subsistence wage, will claim to be too busy earning the money for the family's evening meal, rent and school fees, to attend the screening programme. Ignorance about both of these diseases, exhaustion, as well as the fear of being diagnosed are all barriers to seeking help. To encourage the women to come for checks, a magician entertains their children and grandchildren, as well as entertaining the women too. A cosmetic company brings a team to put make-up on the women, so the overall atmosphere is light hearted and fun. The women go home and spread the word in their communities that the whole experience is very positive. Women have often seen the sad fate of others in their



community, who have already suffered and died with breast cancer, due to a very late diagnosis; the QSCBC project hopes to combat this type of understandable attitude. Breast cancer to many women still equates to a terrible death.



Figure 5: Women from the communities at the QSCBC for screening.

All funds are raised for this outreach project by the QSCBC and the work is carried out at weekends, preventing a financial burden or indeed an increase in the heavy daily workload at the QSCBC. All staff volunteer their personal time, aided by cancer survivors and their families. The project has a remit to serve the very poorest women, so to guarantee the best stewardship of the raised funds, the valuable insight and assistance of volunteer social workers is gratefully accepted. It is essential to ensure the funds raised for the project are used in the most valuable way and on the most needy candidates. QSCBC also works closely with NGOs in each community to achieve this goal.

The project tries wherever possible to work alongside other welfare programmes, including those that promote microcredit projects or childrens' education programmes, which aim to improve the quality of life for these women and their families. One project may offer help with school fees and uniforms, another baby milk. An international chain of restaurants that has cooked for President Clinton, President Bush and President

Putin, has also agreed to work with the QSCBC, by teaching the poorest women from the slums, to cook, as a way of helping them secure better jobs and income for their families. The average subsistence wage of these women is approximately 100-200 Baht per day [approx. 2-4 pounds sterling]. Many of the women are bringing up families alone or are the grandmothers of the children, it is essential that they are offered the opportunity to have tests which give early detection of cancer. Without the diagnostic screening tests offered by the QSCBC, these women would not have the opportunity to have any care.



Figure 6: QSCBC Building

Her Majesty Queen Sirikit wants the centre to be a sanctuary open to all women but primarily the underprivileged; it is now a reality.