Patient Perspective on Survivorship

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Disclosures of potential conflicts of interest may be found at the end of this article.

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Dr. Samia Al-Amoudi is chief executive officer, founder, and board member of Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Al-Amoudi Center of Excellence in Breast Cancer, chair of the Scientific Chair for Breast Cancer Research, consultant obstetrician, gynecologist, former vice dean of the College of Medicine and Allied Sciences, and associate professor, College of Medicine, King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

In 2007, in recognition of her campaign to break the silence and raise awareness surrounding breast cancer across the Arab world, Dr. Al-Amoudi was presented the U.S. State Department's International Women of Courage award by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and was the first Arab woman to be so honored.

Dr. Al-Amoudi is a Susan G. Komen Global Advocate and was a visiting scientist at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center during July and August 2011. She has written extensively on breast cancer and pregnancy and remains dedicated to expanding the reach of her message by serving on a number of women's health committees.

This is my story and the beginning of my fight against breast cancer, for myself, for all women in Saudi Arabia, and for women worldwide. My struggle with breast cancer is a message of love I extend to every woman to emphasize the importance of timely and regular check-ups.

My journey as a breast cancer survivor and an advocate for women's health began the day I came home from having lunch with my children. I went to my room and, by chance, touched my breast. I felt a lump. In that moment, my medical instincts sharpened. I examined the lump, checking its size, and searched for lymph nodes under my arm. My worst fears overwhelmed me, and I knew what I had. I began to cry out to God in tears and walk in circles around the room helplessly. I regretted being a doctor in that moment because sometimes it is true what they say: ignorance is bliss.

I was diagnosed with breast cancer in April 2006 and received my biopsy result on my birthday. The results confirmed it was stage II, of an aggressive type, and was HER-2⁺. My responsibility as a mother compelled me to share this news with my children first, and I wanted them to hear it from me. I spoke in words they could understand so that we would face this crisis together as a family, which I felt would strengthen their characters and will. I have

always told them that being a believer begins with facing crisis.

I prepared myself for the battle and decided to fight with all the faith I could muster. Instead of leaving Saudi Arabia for treatment, I chose to have my colleagues treat me in my homeland. I placed my trust, my health, and my life in their hands. I trusted them immensely, and I have the greatest faith in the ongoing medical advancements in Saudi Arabia as well as in my own people. This faith, in itself, has been an integral part of my treatment.

Many people have asked me how this could have happened to me, a doctor. The fact is that I, like many others, can get so distracted by the daily responsibilities of being a working mother that it is sometimes easy to neglect myself. My message grows from this experience: Take action toward early detection. If you are a woman over the age of 40, get a mammogram. Evidence, such as the first screening trial in Saudi Arabia in 2007 (BI-RADS), shows the benefits of screening [1, 2]. My mission is to break the silence and spread this message using the media and whatever other means of communication are available. In order to help save the lives of women in Saudi Arabia's closed and conservative community, the taboo of discussing breast cancer must be overcome.

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My first step in helping overcome this taboo was to write my story in the local newspaper, *Al-Madina*. I will never forget the bizarre question an editor asked me: "As a well-known physician, don't you think that publicizing your story amounts to self-defamation?" I told him this was exactly the kind of prejudice I feel compelled to challenge. Having a disease is not a crime or a cause for shame but rather a chance to warn and save others. This vision inspired me to establish the Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Al-Amoudi Center of Excellence in Breast Cancer within the King Abdulaziz University, located in Jeddah, to conduct research studying the gap in available medical services and improving the quality of services available.

I have been honored by a number of respected organizations for this work; nonetheless, the most prestigious recognition I receive is from the people who give me positive feedback and encouragement, proving to me that this work is not in vain. People are now talking about a subject that was once forbidden in Saudi society. As a cancer survivor and patient advocate, I am now seen not only as a doctor but also as a close confidante and as a fellow patient who understands. A girl once told me, "You have taught us things that our mothers, scholars, and teachers have not: how to be strong and have a positive attitude." A man told me that before reading my articles, it never occurred to him to discuss breast cancer with

his family. Afterward, he discussed with his mother the importance of getting a mammogram. All of these kind words inspire me to continue the fight to increase research and spread awareness.

Women's health and cancer patients' rights often go unrecognized and are not advocated sufficiently. My focus now is on breast cancer patients' rights in prevention, treatment, and employment law. My mission is to empower women with the knowledge of their health rights, particularly breast cancer patients, emphasizing their reproductive and adolescent sexual health, and women with physical limitations, especially the deaf and mute.

I do not intend for my story to be a cause for pity but rather an example of how important early detection of breast cancer is. I would like my voice to reach every household in every neighborhood to break the barriers of silence. All I dream of today is to have a better tomorrow for my daughter and for every daughter in the world to be empowered with the knowledge to advocate for her health rights. To quote Kofi Annan, "Health finally will be seen not as a blessing to be wished for, but as a human right to be fought for" [3].

DISCLOSURE

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