Cancer and culture: Beliefs and barriers that inhibit early detection and treatment of breast cancer among indigenous womenfolk in rural Sarawak

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Breast cancer is the most prevalent cancer among Malaysian women, with rural and indigenous communities in Sarawak experiencing significant delays in diagnosis and treatment. Despite national guidelines promoting early detection through clinical breast examination and mammography, uptake remains low. Cultural beliefs, stigma, and limited access are hypothesised to contribute to these disparities. This study aimed to explore sociocultural and structural factors influencing breast cancer awareness and health-seeking behaviours among indigenous women in rural Sarawak. **Materials and Methods:** A qualitative study was conducted involving twenty indigenous women aged 20 to 70 years from four rural communities representing diverse geographical contexts: coastal, riverine, highland, and semi-rural. Participants were recruited through community outreach programmes held between March and September 2023. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia or Bahasa Iban, transcribed, translated, and thematically analysed using NVivo software. Coding was performed independently by three researchers and final themes were developed through consensus. **Results:** Five major themes were identified: (1) local belief and the fatalism culture coupled with an incline towards the use of traditional remedies; (2) stigma and embarrassment surrounding breast symptoms, contributing to silence and avoidance; (3) limited knowledge of breast cancer signs, risk factors, and screening options; (4) barriers to healthcare access especially geographical, financial, and logistical constraints; and (5) strong interest in learning about breast health when information is presented in culturally appropriate forms. None of the participants had previously undergone mammography, and most had not practised regular breast self-examination. **Conclusion:** The interplay of cultural norms, stigma, and systemic barriers contributes to delayed breast cancer detection in rural Sarawak. Tailored interventions—including community-based education, mobile screening services, and engagement with local leaders and communities—are essential to promote early detection and reduce breast cancer disparities in these underserved communities.

Keywords: Breast cancer, indigenous women, rural health, cultural beliefs, early detection