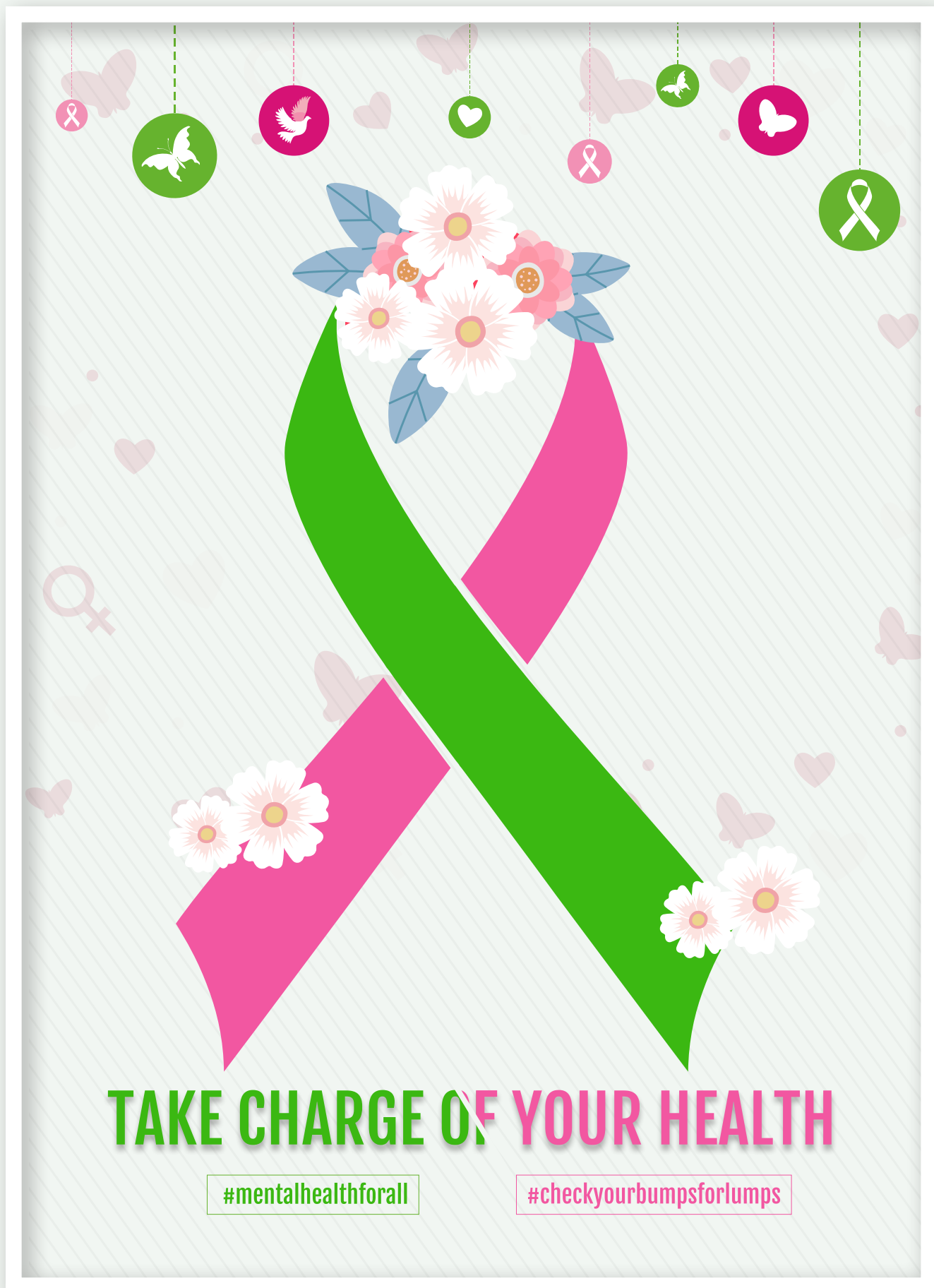




FIJI NATIONAL
UNIVERSITY

FNUUNIKUA

ISSUE NO. 10



OCTOBER 2020

INVEST IN YOUR
HEALTH

TOUTOU SPORTS
PINK WARDROBE

INVEST IN YOUR HEALTH



Pinktober – Relevance to Fiji

It’s Pinktober month. A significant part of the activities related to Pinktober is directed towards raising awareness about breast cancer.

The need to raise awareness about breast cancer is particularly crucial in Fiji as most of our people present late. By the time they present, the disease is already at an advanced stage.

This progressive disease is both challenging and more expensive to treat. The advanced disease requires extensive operations and more extended hospital stays. Complications and recurrences are anticipated if the diagnosis is made at a late stage.

If there is anything this article intends to do, it is to try and change your attitude.

Many patients present late for various reasons, apart from not knowing that treatment options are available. As breast cancer is initially painless, people do not consider it to be serious. Geographical location and costs involved may deter some women from visiting a health care facility. The use of traditional medicine is often sought first before a visit to a health care profession.

Through the Pinktober awareness activities that Fiji National University (FNU) and other organisations are conducting, we hope to spread the message that breast cancer is curable and that the treatment is much simpler if the diagnosis is made early.

We aim to increase health-seeking behaviour among the population and reduce the barriers, both physical and mental, that prevent women (and men) from approaching health care professionals.

Evidence shows that about one in eight women will develop breast cancer over the course of their lifetime.

Some of the risk factors like age, genetics and

family history cannot be changed. However, many of the other risk factors CAN be changed. Possible risk reduction strategies that should be encouraged are reducing alcohol intake, cessation of smoking, achieving normal body weight, increasing physical activity, healthy eating, choosing to breastfeed and limiting exposure to radiation and hormonal therapy if possible.

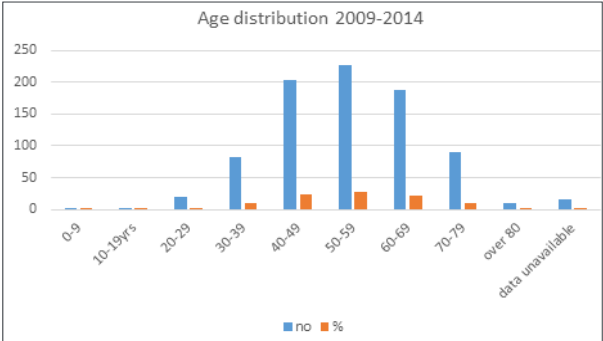
Below are some statistics that were published in the recent issue of the Fiji Medical Journal. The article by Dr Jale Temo, a local consultant pathologist, highlighted the confirmed breast cancer cases from the breast specimens collected in Fiji from 2009 to 2014.

Year	Breast specimens	Breast cancer
2009	327	117
2010	351	132
2011	352	110
2012	350	133
2013	415	171
2014	450	177
Total	2244	840

Table 1 Source: Fiji Medical Journal Vol 24 No 3 August 2020

Thirty-seven per cent (37%) of breast specimens taken in Fiji between 2009 and 2014 was confirmed to be cancer. Although breast cancer is predominant in females, 2.4% of the total breast cancer patients over the six years studied above in Fiji were males.

Table 2 below shows that more than eighty-five per cent (85%) of breast cancer patients were between the ages of 39 to 69 years. Less than one per



cent of diagnosed cases were below twenty years.

Table 2 Source: Fiji Medical Journal Vol 24 No 3 August 2020

Discovering a lump in the breast is a scary experience. Most of these lumps are not cancers, however, all of them need to be assessed by a health care professional so that a proper diagnosis can be made.

If the diagnosis is cancer, then the stage of the disease is determined before treatment is started.

There is a considerable difference between the results of early and late cancer treatment.

Ninety-eight per cent (98%) of stage 1 breast cancer patients will survive for five years or more. If the diagnosis is made when the disease is at stage 4 (which is very common in Fiji), about twenty-five per cent (25%) of these patients will survive for five years or more.

The one-year overall mortality for breast cancer patients at CWMH for the period 1999-2003 was about sixty per cent (60%).

In 2018, the overall one-year mortality had significantly decreased to twenty (20%) per cent.

The approach to diagnosis, management and comprehensive care of patients in the Ministry of Health facilities in Fiji has remarkably changed the



McGoon shares the love

Staff Nurse Maraia McGoon is a familiar face for cancer patients needing palliative care at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital's (CWMH) Oncology Department in Suva. Her humbleness and soft smile is a beacon of hope for many end-stage cancer patients. Their stories are heartbreaking, one which McGoon can relate to herself, having walked through similar pain after losing her immediate family members to cancer.

"My mother had colorectal cancer, and my elder sister was diagnosed with breast cancer. I lost both of them in a year," an emotional McGoon mentioned.

Tertiary Life and Career

McGoon (*pictured above*) hails from Vagadaci village in Levuka with maternal ties to Nakobo, Cakaudrove. Inspired by her elder sister Sereima McGoon, a former Lab Technician who worked at Labasa Hospital, McGoon enrolled at the Fiji School of Nursing (FSN) in 1994. FSN is now part of FNU's College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences (CMNHS).

"I was always fascinated with the work done by the health care professionals, and I used to look upon my

elder sister, who also happened to be in the medical field. This was enough for me to make that important decision concerning my career," said McGoon.

The FNU Alumna graduated with a Diploma in Nursing in 1996 and worked at the CWM and Lautoka hospitals, Levuka Health Centre and Batiki Nursing Station in Lomaiviti.

"My family was excited to see me achieve my goals even though I wanted to be a school teacher like my mother, and indeed, becoming a nurse was a dream come true," she shared.

Aspiring to continue her education, McGoon juggled work and studies as she graduated with a Postgraduate Certificate in Leadership in 2006 and Postgraduate Diploma in Nurse Practitioner in 2019 from FNU.

Cancer-stricken

Nine years into her career as a Staff Nurse, McGoon's mother got diagnosed with colorectal cancer. She was still coming to terms with this when the news broke that her elder sister had lumps in her breasts.

"To watch my mother and my sister grow weaker

and weaker was immensely distressing," the teary-eyed Nurse mentioned.

Both, McGoon's mother and sister lost their battle against cancer, in a year, which she describes as the most painful moment of her life that left her devastated for years.

"My mother and sister were the strongest women I knew, and losing them unexpectedly, capsized my life. I miss them every day."

Oncology Unit

Bottling up her grief, McGoon then joined the Oncology/Palliative Care Nursing team at CWMH in 2005, to provide compassionate care to cancer patients who have little hope of meaningful recovery.

"Now, when I see any breast cancer patient, it reminds me of my sister. I remember the surgery she went through and the unbearable pain that she had to suffer. She had chemotherapy treatment abroad, and it motivates me to understand my patients better, to make them as comfortable as possible and to help alleviate their pain," she said.

McGoon spends most of her time visiting cancer patients at home. Her role includes monitoring patients, pain management, administering medication and providing patients with personal care.

According to the specialised Palliative Care Nurse, an average of at least two new cancer cases, mainly breast cancer are referred to the Oncology Department each week.

"I see the cases at home through the continuous support provided by the Fiji Cancer Society. I have travelled between Suva-Nausori, Navua even to places as far as Tailevu and Naitasiri to ensure that my patients receive the best medical support."

"Following the death of my mother and sister, I did not know what life had in store for me. However, I feel blessed to have touched the lives of the many patients I have looked after."

Advice

While there's no magic pill to eradicate cancer, there are many cancer survivor stories which McGoon shares with her patients to encourage them to fight the battle.

"I always encourage my patients never to give up, and I urge everyone who knows someone suffering from Cancer, to keep motivating them for a new lease of life," she mentioned.

"My mother and sister's journey with cancer has taught me to experience everything that I can, always to forgive and most importantly, to never take anything for granted." McGoon is a proud mother of two children aged 22 and 11 years and the foster mother to her late sister's 20-year-old twin daughters.

continued from Page 2

outcome in the past fifteen plus years.

The message is clear – our attitude needs to change. Reduce your risk of getting breast cancer, as highlighted above.

Report to a health care professional immediately if you discover any abnormality in the breast. When the diagnosis is confirmed, get appropriate medical treatment without delay.

As Winston Churchill said, "attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference".

No Health without Mental Health

It is also worthwhile to mention another health campaign that ran parallel with FNU's Pinktober activities during the first half of October – mental health awareness.

Mental health is vital to our existence. It affects our behaviour, thinking, emotions and relationships. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community".

This definition emphasises the importance of mental

health as the foundation of an individual's well-being and functioning.

However, it is unfortunate that we often do not appreciate its value until it is lost. For example, having experienced a bout of depression, nursing a child with special intellectual needs or caring for a parent with dementia.

We take mental health for granted and through a lack of knowledge and appreciation treat our mental health like an indulgence we can do without instead of as a vital basic necessity!

Mental, neurological and behavioural disorders are common to all countries and cause immense suffering. People with these disorders are often subjected to social isolation, poor quality of life and increased mortality. These disorders are the cause of staggering economic and social costs.

Hundreds of millions of people worldwide are affected by mental, behavioural, neurological and substance use disorders. For example, estimates made by WHO in 2002 showed that 154 million people globally suffer from depression and 25 million people from schizophrenia, 91 million people are affected by alcohol-use disorders and 15 million by drug-use disorders. A recently published WHO report shows

that 50 million people suffer from epilepsy and 24 million from Alzheimer and other dementias.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 877,000 people die by suicide every year.

In the first 8 months of 2020, there have been 72 deaths by suicide in Fiji, as reported by the Fiji Police Force. We are losing young productive people to suicide which is preventable but complex a phenomenon. It is a public health concern which requires a comprehensive, multidisciplinary and integrated approach that includes not only the Government and the health sector but NGOs, CSOs, communities and individuals.

Mental Health is everybody's business!! We must invest in our mental health and wellbeing.

We need to work together to take ownership of our mental health and make the best use of limited resources and expertise.

Having good mental health increases our morale, productivity, resiliency and self-esteem leading to prosperous communities and nations.

Dr William May
Acting Vice-Chancellor

FNU offers courses on mental health



Tackling mental health needs a multi-pronged approach and having well-trained people to deal with the issue is critical. The Fiji National University’s (FNU), College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences’ (CMNHS), prioritises mental health and incorporates it into its various courses, so medical and nursing students are equipped to deal with mental health issues when needed.

CMNHS Head of the Discipline – Psychiatry, Dr Balam Pandit said its students needed to know the issue so that they could better address and provide care to people coping with mental health issues.

“At the College, mental health is a priority and as such, psychiatry happens to be an integral major block in its flagship MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery) programme,” Dr Pandit said.

“There are elements of mental health in most of our programmes at CMNHS, and we also have specific courses like the Postgraduate Diploma in Mental Health and Postgraduate Diploma in Mental Health Nursing.”

“These courses focus on recognition of signs and symptoms, comprehensive assessment, planning and executing management strategies. The level of training varies according to the level of the course (Bachelor, Postgraduate Diploma or Masters) and trade (Medicine or Nursing).”

Dr Pandit said during the implementation of these programmes, medical and nursing students needed to undertake adequately supervised clinic-based training. Consequently, they are prepared for service delivery at the time of graduation.

“During the training period – for example, for MBBS students this is seven weeks of separate psychiatry block training in year four plus a proposed one-week attachment

in psychiatry in the final year of the programme starting from next year. For the Postgraduate Diploma in Mental Health students, this is one year of full-time training as psychiatry academic registrar – students are trained about holistic assessment and management of cases, with varying depth and extensiveness in accordance with the design of the courses.”

“In terms of management, it includes both pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions that range from counselling to brief psychotherapy, supportive psychotherapy, interpersonal therapy, insight-oriented psychotherapy and family therapy to cognitive behaviour therapy.

“The range of topics related to mental health issues across the various age groups and gender are covered within the scope of these courses.”

Dr Pandit highlighted that the institution’s medical and nursing graduates then work throughout the country, and in many parts of the region, at various levels.

“In terms of accessibility to mental health care, this means the services trickle down to the community level through primary health care systems (which links the larger health facilities to primary health centres and village health workers)” he said.

“As highlighted, it’s not only counselling but various other forms of non-pharmacological interventions plus biological interventions such as medicines and electroconvulsive therapy that are also available for managing mental health issues locally.”

FNU’s mental health campaign



In the weeks between World Suicide Prevention Day on September 10 and World Mental Health Day on October 10, Fiji National University (FNU) organised various activities and wellness screenings to engage staff and students to foster wellbeing.

These activities were organised in partnership with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services, FNU Student Association (FNUSA) and the Office of the Registrar’s Counselling Unit.

- **Moving Mondays**
Staff and students were introduced to Deskercise, (Desk Exercises). These were simple yet effective exercises that could be done at any time of the day at your desks. It does not require any special equipment or gear and helps us to move more to maintain our health.
- **Talk time Tuesdays**
This was to encourage people to reach out and connect to others. Talk time Tuesdays were organised for FNU staff to talk about work-related stress. Videos on Mental Health was circulated to all staff and students.
- **Wellness Wednesdays**
Regular health checks and lunchtime physical activities such as Walks, Zumba and Bhangra were organised.
- **Thankful Thursdays**
Staff and students were encouraged to reflect on what they were grateful for. Experiencing gratitude, thankfulness and appreciation tend to foster positive feelings, which contributes to one’s overall sense of wellbeing. A Positivity Tree was set up in all FNU Libraries, where the staff and students could share a positive thought.

Your Say



We spend the most time with our thoughts. If our thoughts aren’t healthy, that is projected in our performance. There is a saying that goes “your thoughts become your words and your words become your actions,” so everything starts from the mind. It is statistically proven that our mental health affects our physical health as well, hence, it should be prioritised because our mental health is just as important as our physical health.

Laura Hannah Rounds
Student

Dialogue about BREAST CANCER imperative

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in women affecting on an average = 40/100,000 women.

Despite the developments in health services, breast cancer survival is still meagre in low and middle-income countries with at least 40 % and 60% respectively, compared to an 80% survival rate in high-income countries.

It's Pinktober: Breast Cancer Awareness Month again and this year the theme 'Early Detection, Early Presentation and Early Treatment' really hits home.

Most literature has attributed the differences in survival rates due to the lack of screening services and in most parts, late presentation.

Latest data from Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH) from January 2019 to August 2020 shows that there have been 187 diagnosed cases of breast cancer, and only a third of patients have agreed for treatment. Majority affected [72%] are 40-70 years old. Therefore, the age bracket for women is usually forties and beyond. However, this cancer can affect anyone as shown by our latest data, the youngest patient being 20 years of age.

While breast cancer affects women, our data has shown that 2% of cases are men – so it doesn't discriminate against gender.

The two main issues that are faced at CWMH with regards to breast cancer is related to late presentation and the low treatment rates. The common reasons for 2/3 of patients refusing treatment is usually a lack of awareness and insight on the disease and the services that are available to help them. So patients do not present themselves until the late stages when little to no curative

treatment can be provided. Many patients still prefer to undergo alternative treatment methods such as herbal medicine and religious advice. Other patients would refuse surgery as they have fears surrounding 'going under a knife'.

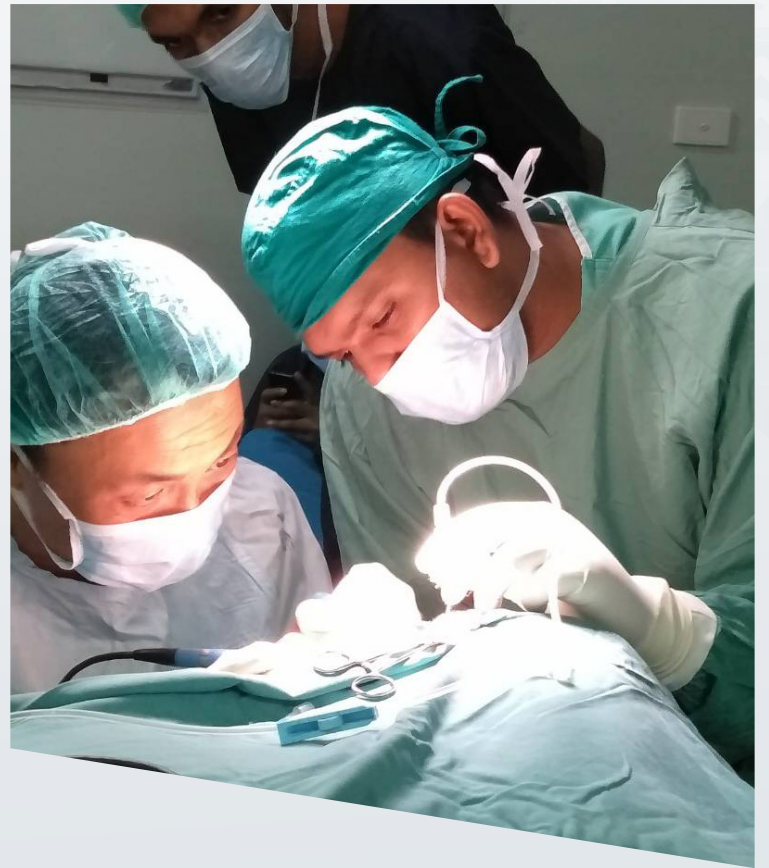
Breast Cancer is usually not a subject that people discuss openly at home – it is mostly done behind closed doors and less in public. By celebrating Pinktober and talking about it more openly is a step forward to create awareness so that more women could come and get the much-needed treatment. We have launched the Pinktober celebrations earlier this month and hope to create more awareness in the hope that our message reaches to everyone across the country.

The surgical team at CWMH have launched a Pinktober sports day for the doctors and their families to commemorate breast cancer awareness, and we hope to make this a yearly event. It is our objective to take breast cancer awareness beyond the hospital – to our families and communities and at the same time, promote the importance of health and wellness.

Breast Cancer is curable in the early stages so if you know someone with a painless breast lump or changes in breast appearance, do encourage them to present to the nearest health facility for a referral to the surgical department.

We take time to remember those who are gone, those still fighting and those who we are yet to help fight against breast cancer.

Dr Sajneel Prasad
Surgical Registrar
CWMH



Dr Sajneel Prasad (right) during a surgery.

Toutou sports pink wardrobe



Young Kalaveti Mokosiro Toutou loves to come dressed in black for lectures. But for the entire month of October, he had dedicated to wearing pink to help raise awareness for breast cancer.

Toutou (*pictured left*) is studying Trade Diploma in Customs at Fiji National University's (FNU) Namaka Campus and said witnessing his aunt (mum's sister) endure breast cancer in 2018 was "scary" and "life-changing".

Tears flooded his eyes as he described how he felt helpless and angry after hearing the cancer news. However, he was supportive and loving by showing his aunt that she was not alone in her struggle.

"I was supportive of my aunt. However, I was angry because she was relying on herbal medicine and by the time she took the doctor's advise, it was too late."

"I urge women to take preventive measures such as routine check-ups and getting tested. Early diagnosis is critical in most case, and it is so because it simply saves life" he said.

Soft-spoken Toutou said that he was attending classes in pink, a colour seen as "universal love of oneself and other" to offer support to those undergoing treatment for breast

cancer and to honour those that have lost the battle.

The former Natabua High School students said he wants to create awareness for breast cancer and to encourage women to be pro-active with their health.

"By wearing pink, I am not only showing my support by what I wear, but I'm also trying to spread understanding of what the colour pink stands for. Pink is the colour for breast cancer and a symbol of empowerment and hope," he said.

Toutou said his goal is to engage and encourage men to wear pink.

"By wearing pink, not only are we are raising awareness of breast cancer, but we are committing to actively supporting the health and wellness of women in our lives.

According to Toutou, he is honouring his aunt by wearing pink, and he hopes to encourage people who are currently battling breast cancer.

"Creating awareness of breast cancer is very personal, and if I can share my experiences with anyone, it will definitely help them deal with fear and anger," he said.

Toutou's advise to other men is to be supportive of breast cancer awareness campaigns and to provide support to females they know.

Art Therapy

Paints, pastels, egg cartons, clay, canvas and rice: these may not sound like the traditional tools used in the treatment of mental health.

But a recent research collaboration at Fiji National University (FNU) has found that art-making could offer a meaningful and affordable recovery tool for Fijian people trying to find their way back from mental illness.

In a low-resource setting such as Fiji, it's important that we think creatively and innovatively about ways to help people suffering or recovering from mental disorders.

Art therapy aims to help people improve their mental health through creative practice, and is based on the idea that self-expression through art can unlock emotions and help the healing process. Crucially, it's usually about the thoughts, feelings and ideas that accompany the process, rather than the resulting artwork itself.



In this way, a person can develop a deeper understanding of the issues or core beliefs that may be contributing to their illness, as well as strengths that could help their recovery.

Art therapy can also increase self-esteem, lessen levels of stress and anxiety, offer a sense of control, and provide a safe outlet through which to express deep and difficult feelings – particularly for those who struggle to express emotions through words alone.

These benefits, however, haven't been widely explored in low and middle-income settings.

With this in mind, researchers at FNU joined forces with La Trobe University in Australia, the Fiji Ministry of Health, St Vincent's Mental Health Service, and the Fiji Alliance for Mental Health to explore the challenges, benefits, and potential of art as a mental health recovery tool in Fiji.

“The use of art in therapy can yield many benefits, but a key outcome is a sense of being able to understand oneself better”.

Tradition and innovation

The project began with a series of training workshops to prepare facilitators and build capacity in the use of art therapy in mental health. Chosen facilitators then went on to run a year-long series of once or twice weekly workshops which engaged patients, their carers and families, health professionals, and volunteers in regular art-making sessions.

The workshops sought to establish a neutral and non-judgmental environment in which participants were guided to express themselves.

We provided a variety of art forms that we hoped would appeal, including acrylic and fabric paints, pastels, calico, cardboard, rice, canvas and clay, as well as local materials such as voivoi – the dried leaves of an indigenous plant traditionally used for mat weaving, and masi – a fibrous cloth made from the inner bark of the mulberry tree.

The use of traditional art forms and materials has been a strong point of the project and highlights Fiji's multicultural foundations.

We adopted a strengths-based approach – where the focus is on a participant's strengths and skills, rather than their perceived weaknesses. A particularly important element for us was incorporating community and traditional values, and exploring cultural understandings of art-making in Fiji.

The art-making sessions were well-received by participants, who reported that the imaginative, creative process boosted self-esteem, fulfilment and morale.

Others spoke of feeling a sense of connectedness to others and feelings of acceptance.

A facilitator of the art sessions herself described how art-making 'helped lighten the mood and allowed participants to self-express and become relaxed'.

As a psychiatrist working in the Fiji mental health service, the outcomes of this project have been very exciting to me.

It has shown that the use of art is an acceptable, appealing and affordable medium – one that is enabling and engaging to users, and can have beneficial and meaningful outcomes when used as a recovery tool.

Working together

Involving those affected by mental health issues in the project's development has been an essential element of its success, stressing the importance of the adage 'nothing for them without them'.

Universities, too, have played a vital role, providing local evidence for what is known anecdotally.

We have also been able to provide evidence and testimony of strategies that are beneficial and practical in our context, and that have only previously been reported on in the developed world.

Partnerships

Similarly, longstanding partnerships both within and outside Fiji have been vital. The Fiji Ministry of Health and Medical Services has frequently collaborated with FNU and the Fiji Alliance for Mental Health to raise the profile of mental health issues in the country.

Meanwhile, by working closely with St. Vincent's Mental Health Pacific Fund, local stakeholders have benefited from opportunities for training and capacity building.

For the next phase, we hope to explore other art forms that are particularly well accepted in Fiji, such as dance and music.

Another interest is talanoa, a traditional Fijian concept of storytelling, which allows the open exchange of ideas and experiences for the collective good.

This idea of 'storytelling for a purpose' has found particular resonance in recent years through the Talanoa Dialogue – launched at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Fiji in 2017 – which used storytelling to create a process of inclusive and transparent dialogue around climate change.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive feedback for our project, it remains difficult to harness local support for mental health activities due to the stigma sadly still associated with mental illness.

But in spite of the challenges, the project team is keen to forge ahead and work with local communities to continue the momentum and enthusiasm, and to establish art-making as a recognised recovery tool in Fiji.

**This is a reproduced article written by Dr Odille Chang that was first published by The Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). Dr Chang is the Head of School Medical Sciences at FNU's College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences' (CMNHS).*

Saved by god's grace - Cancer Survivor Lal cherishes life



“When reflecting on her journey, Lal said one piece of quick advice she would give all women was to perform breast self-examination regularly and not to be embarrassed if diagnosed with breast cancer”.

Fiji National University (FNU) academic Ruth Lal, clearly remembers the day her doctor uttered the words “breast cancer” and confirmed her worst fears.

According to Lal, at that precise moment, she felt like the world around her just came to a complete halt as death stared her in the face.

“It seemed as though I was delivered a death sentence. I had voices echoing in my mind that I would die and that there was no chance of survival. I felt helpless and powerless,” she said. However, with the overwhelming support of her husband, children and her church group, Lal conquered her fear and battled the stage three breast cancer.

The 55-year-old said it was during a routine self-breast examination in 2014 that she discovered a lump on her left breast.

Lal, who is a lecturer in Management at FNU’s, College of Business, Hospitality and Tourism Studies (CBHTS), said her initial biopsy test stated that the lump was not cancerous.

“After three months, the hospital in Suva advised me to remove the lump, which was sent for testing. After three weeks, I received the results, and the doctor informed me that I need to

remove my left breast.”

“I was in total shock as the initial biopsy stated that the lump was not cancerous, and no malignancy cells were found. I almost fell off my chair when I was told to remove my left breast because the results say it’s cancerous.”

She decided to undergo further diagnosis overseas and travelled to a hospital in Sydney, Australia.

“There I was advised I had to undergo surgery to remove my left breast. After the surgery, I went through chemotherapy and radiation in 2015 to 2016,” she said. Lal said finance was the only significant obstacle she faced during treatment.

“I spent almost AU\$75,000 in total for my treatment, and I only had half of it. God provided the other half through kind-hearted people, families, friends, former students, and church families in Fiji and abroad.”

“My families in Australia supported me tremendously, and my husband, who did a lot of fundraising in Fiji to collect funds for my treatment. My two boys helped me through prayer and fasting,” she said.

The soft-spoken Lal said that she is thankful to her brother and her sister-in-law, for their support during her

treatment. “The other obstacle was that I was away from my husband and kids for almost one and a half years, and I missed them during that time. I overcame this through prayer again and calling and talking to them daily.”

Lal, who resides in Ba, said that there were several programmes and services offered to her with the treatment process.

“Awareness programmes, health and exercise club member, even beauty workshops, how to take care of skins, nails and body during and after the treatment. I was also given vouchers to have a free body massage three times during treatment, diet club member (focusing on special diets during the treatment).”

This year is Lal’s sixth anniversary, and she’s had no recurrence of cancer. She travels to FNU Namaka Campus, thrice weekly to take lectures.

“God answered every prayer. My chemotherapy and radiation were painless; I did not experience any significant pain or suffering or was at any time bedridden. I did not struggle physically at all.”

“My advice to women who are newly diagnosed is to keep your head high as there is always a light at the end.”

Health and Wellbeing is important – Dr Waqa



“The most important message we would like to get across is that all women can and should self-examine their breasts every month for lumps and breast changes”.

The health and wellbeing of students and staff are fundamental to the overall health of individuals. It is important to promote these practices as it creates a happier study and work environment.

Fiji National University’s (FNU) UniClinic plays a pivotal role, working within the organisation to ensure students and staff receive health services whenever required.

General Practitioner at FNU’s UniClinic, Dr Henry Waqa, said the clinic was at the forefront of the University’s Pinktober campaign as they advocate for the early detection and screenings of health issues such as breast cancer.

“The Pinktober campaign which is in October of every year is important because we need to continue to be reminded that there is a fight against Breast Cancer, and if we all join together in this fight, the loss of loved ones can be dramatically reduced,” Dr Waqa said.

“Our health and wellbeing are very important.”

“Over the month, through the

inspirational stories of the many survivors that we get to hear of, people also begin to realise that lives can be saved. We, therefore, need to keep telling people the importance of early detection and not just early detection but seeking proper medical attention from then on.”

Dr Waqa said people needed to heed proper medical advice and care, as many opted for non-medical treatment after detection.

“More people need to heed the proper advice for the best outcomes for their health and the wellbeing of their families,” he said.

“We have seen that many who tend to present late seek traditional medicine first. Even though there is a place for traditional medicine, when it comes to lumps in the breast, proper medical advice and treatment should be sought.”

At FNU, he added, students and staff were encouraged to visit the clinic for consultations and examinations.

“The UniClinic is providing free breast examinations for women who, after self-examination of their breasts,

feel that they may have a lump in their breast or for those who have noticed a change in size and shape of their breast or changes in the skin, nipples and areola of their breasts.”

“For anyone who has noticed any lumps or changes in their breast, we encourage them to visit the Clinic for further consultation and medical advice.”

“Students can walk in with their student ID and staff are encouraged to make an appointment with the clinic nurse.”

He said these services were offered all-year-round and proper referrals were done after consultations.

“We examine our students and staff and ensure that everything is confidential. If needed, referrals are made to either the specialist Breast Clinic at the two main hospitals (CWM Hospital and Lautoka Hospital for staff in the West), the Oxfam clinic or to the private hospitals for those covered by insurance. Dr Waqa also highlighted the importance of self-examination and encouraged people to take charge of their health.

Understanding Breast Cancer Services, Screening and Treatment available in Fiji



“In Fiji, the Fiji Cancer Society (FCS) has been the leading organisation largely involved in advocacy awareness and patient support for over two decades”.

Every October organisations, institutions, companies, and people worldwide join hands to support the Breast Cancer Awareness month. Participants dress up in pink, organise morning tea’s, hold fundraising initiatives and organise forums for survivors to share inspiring stories related to breast cancer.

These activities all have one common goal: to raise awareness about the importance of breast cancer prevention measures like mammography screening. Most of the charity efforts surrounding Pinktober aim to partake in the fight against breast cancer through financial support and donations to cancer organisations.

Fiji Cancer Society

Fiji Cancer Society is dedicated to assisting cancer patients and their families, supporting survivors, conducting cancer education programmes and providing free cancer screening Fiji-wide. FSC engages, educates and motivates communities through awareness

programs, provide cancer screening services to encourage early detection of cancer and reducing cancer risks through healthy lifestyle choices. .

Breast Cancer Awareness month

For October, FCS had planned and delivered over 18 cancer educational programmes which will continue throughout the month. The Society has also provided about seven free breast and cervical cancer screenings at various locations including public screening. Through outreach programmes, FCS successfully reached over 5,000 people last month to raise awareness on early detection and the services available. Throughout October, FCS had partnered with the Cancer Survivor’s Network who equally partakes in all cancer education programs. A similar initiative was also carried out with the Western Support Group, who conduct cancer awareness programs throughout the western division. Various programmes were also organised in the Western Division whereby the respective zone nurses

were engaged to help deliver screening and awareness services in places where no has reached out to.

Making a difference

The Fiji Cancer Society has and continues to provide the continuum of care to the newly diagnosed patients via our home visitation or patient support program. We provide much-needed assistance to the patients once they are registered with FCS. Such assistance is not generally offered to cancer patients at the hospital or once they are discharged. Hence, we bridge that gap and work together with the Ministry of Health and Medical Services to continue assisting by giving priority to the needy patients first. Our services are for those cancer patients who are not able to afford to come to the clinic for their check-up due to lack of bus/taxi/airfare, buy diapers and medications which are not listed under the free-government medicine scheme.

Darisha Datt | Program Manager
Fiji Cancer Society

Caring for the sick, Alumna Nair shares her journey

The journey for patients diagnosed with cancer is both mentally and physically exhausting. The on-going treatment and anxious moments hoping for some good news takes a toll on patients and their families.

Children who are diagnosed with cancer are treated at the Paediatric Oncology Unit at the Colonial War Memorial Hospital (CWMH) in Suva. This is a special unit that looks after children with cancer.

As you walk into the specialised unit, you will quickly realise that it is different from the rest of the wards. Each room in the unit has cartoon-themed paintings and has a television, fridge, air conditioning and private bathrooms.

These are designed to keep the children in a joyful environment and to make their stay as comfortable as possible.

“The Oncology Units are always very different. While we provide the treatment and care for patients, we also try to provide support to their families. Seeing children suffer saddens me always so I can only imagine what their families must be going through,” said Vashilta Nair.

Nair is a registered nurse by profession who had served in the Paediatric Oncology Unit for almost three years until July 2020.

She further added that paediatric oncology covers every type of cancer and no cancer behaves precisely like the other.

Sharing a typical day at work in the unit, she said that it usually involved a huge array of treatment protocols on the clinical side but adding that a human touch to it all was quintessential.

“Besides the treatment protocols, equipment prepping for chemotherapy, organising the monthly chemo calendars, my work involved ensuring that the patients were given the best care possible. Because they are children, we needed to pay extra attention to them. Some of them are alone and needed cheering up. It is our job to ensure the patients are kept happy.”

The proud FNU alumna is very passionate about serving the paediatric oncology patients and hopes to be transferred back into that unit.



After serving there for seven months, she was transferred to Paediatric Oncology Unit.

After serving in this unit for almost three years, she was transferred to Neonatal ICU in July 2020. This is where she currently serves.

“In this unit, we provide critical care to premature and sick newborns. We also offer support to the parents and prepare them for the neonates’ care at home when discharged as well as administer medications, monitor vital signs and provide vital nutrients to newborns.

Words of Wisdom

Her advice to those intending to take up placements at the Oncology unit, “nurses touch people’s lives in many ways.”

“They usually spend more time with the Oncology patient than the patient’s physician or any other professional caregiver and can develop a very intimate bond with their patients.”

“Patients and families will remember their nurses for the care they provide during a challenging time of the patients’ life.”

“You must ensure that you provide the best care possible and make the patients’ as well as their families’ journeys through this difficult phase as easy as possible.”

Early Life and Education

As a little girl, Nair would watch the nurses in their blue and white uniforms in awe. She had great admiration for nurses and respected that work that they did in helping save people’s lives.

“I believe that nurses play a huge role in health care. Their role focuses on the care of individuals, families, and communities so they may attain, maintain, or recover optimal health and quality of life. Because of this, I was very passionate about nursing and hoped that one day I too would be a nurse,” she shared.

Nair was born and raised in Suva. Her father is an Operations Manager at a shipping company while her mother is a homemaker.

Youngest of three sisters, Nair completed her primary education at Nehru Memorial Primary School and her secondary education at Mahatma Gandhi Memorial High School.

Nair embarked on her journey to serving people in 2013 when she enrolled in the Bachelor of Nursing programme at the Fiji National University’s (FNU) College of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences’ (CMNHS) after completing high school.

“I was nervous and excited at the same time. I had waited a long time for this, and I knew I had to work very hard to achieve my goal. The three-year journey was going to be no easy feat.”

She completed her programme and graduated in December 2015, making her one of the pioneers of the Bachelor of Nursing programme at FNU.

Nair’s Nursing Career

Nair started her internship in April 2016 at CWMH. During the one-year internship, she rotated in all wards; medical, surgical, obstetrics and paediatrics. In April 2017, she became a Registered Nurse at the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU).

“In PICU, we had kids who needed critical care and life support because they were acutely ill or injured.”