

UNDERSTANDING PATHWAYS TO BREAST CANCER DIAGNOSIS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF SYMPTOM APPRAISAL AND HEALTH SEEKING BEHAVIOUR

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Purpose: Timely diagnosis of breast cancer is important to improve survival. The aim of this study was to explore and understand women's pathways to breast cancer diagnosis and factors influencing this journey.

Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 newly diagnosed breast cancer clients attending a tertiary level breast cancer clinic in Cape Town, South Africa. Issues explored included: interpretation of breast changes, signs and symptoms; perceived risk; social and family support; triggers to seeking care; access to health care; use of various levels of care; and

commonly held community beliefs. A thematic analysis was performed underpinned by the theoretical concepts of the Model of Pathways to Treatment framework.

Results: The average time between discovery of bodily changes to breast cancer diagnosis was 8.5 months. Deficits in breast self-awareness and knowledge of breast cancer symptoms delayed women's interpretation of bodily changes as being abnormal. All women first noticed breast lumps, however many did not perceive it as abnormal until additional symptoms were present. General good health, attribution of symptoms to ageing and past benign breast disease resulted in women being complacent about bodily changes. Disclosure to family members served as a trigger to seek health care. The initial type of primary level care services women accessed was influenced by perceptions of care each provided, finances, structural factors, and personal safety related to the physical location of services.

Conclusion: Symptom appraisal and interpretation contributed significantly to delayed presentation. To improve timely diagnosis of breast cancer, interventions that increase women's confidence in detecting breast changes, improve knowledge of breast cancer symptoms, address myths and encourage prompt help-seeking behavior are required.

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