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A literature review on breast cancer epidemics in the Pacific Islanders and the cancer care services in the region

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Introduction: The changing trend of cancer pattern observed during the last 10 years amongst Pacific Island women is alarming with respect to community dynamics, public health epidemics and policies. Breast cancer is now recorded as the second most common incidence of cancer in women after cervical cancer and is one of the top five causes of mortality in the region. Women in the Pacific Islands are usually young while presenting with advanced breast cancer to the hospitals compared to women of the Pacific Islands living in Australia and New Zealand.

Methods: Literature search and reviews for cancer registry and epidemiological findings for major island nations were done. Countries included were Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Island, Vanuatu, Tonga, Samoa, New Caledonia, Cook Islands and French Polynesia. However, New Zealand, Australia and Hawaii (USA) were excluded due to their high socio-economic status and their different health policies. Records were further assessed from PubMed searches, and epidemiological description from the International Agency for Research on Cancer Database.

Results: Extracts from individual national health department records, regional health meetings and synopsis from Pacific Island, breast cancer is becoming another added burden to the already distressed health programs in the Pacific Island communities. Community beliefs about the disease process and participation in the treatment in isolated villages and smaller islands create difficulty in accessing health services. Poor diagnostic facilities in hospitals are also common causes of late presentation. The increasing mortality rate observed in these islanders is a combined outcome of late presentation and lack of cancer care facilities due to poor government cancer policy in the majority of the island nations in the Pacific.

Conclusion: Unless there is a radical change in the government policy, hospital cancer care programs and greater community cancer awareness, the escalating rate will soon create a cancer tsunami in the Pacific.

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