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# Experience of Breast Cancer Patients in Singapore: findings of a pilot study

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## BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Breast cancer is the most common female cancer in Singapore. It accounts for 28 % of Singaporean female cancer cases and this incidence has almost tripled over the last 25 years.

The psychological impact of diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer has been well-researched. There has also been an increasing emphasis on the need for effective physician-patient communication and personalized care, whereby the patient is treated not only for her physical illness but its' psychosocial effects too. However, qualitative studies to date have not specifically evaluated the experiences of breast cancer patients in Singapore.

This pilot study aimed to explore the experiences of breast cancer patients in Singapore.



## METHODS

A focus group discussion was conducted with 6 breast cancer survivors. Participants were recruited from a breast cancer support group in Singapore and received care both in the public and private health care institutions. The focus group explored the breast cancer patients'

- Experience
- Expectations
- Relationship with family



The data was then analyzed to identify the main patterns of responses. The analysis process involved familiarization with the material on a first reading, then classification and coding of the information, followed by the identification of main themes.

## RESULTS

Three main themes and seven sub-themes were identified.

	Themes	Sub-Themes	Supporting Statements
Experience	Perception of Quality of Healthcare services in Singapore	Accessibility of public healthcare system	Participants expressed the common perception that there are many 'barriers and red-tape' within the public healthcare system that prevents immediate access to medical care. It was through personal contacts that they managed to obtain an early appointment with the doctor.
		Low awareness	Participants also felt that there is a general lack of awareness among women with regards to how to access breast screening services and medical care in Singapore.
		Higher quality of care in the private vs public health care sectors	All the participants empathized that there is a longer waiting time at public hospitals due to the larger workload. However, they attest that despite comparable waiting time at the private clinics, the doctors spent more time explaining their conditions. Private doctors were deemed to make more efforts in providing individualized care.
Expectations	Definitions of Quality healthcare	Autonomy	Participants valued their autonomy and wished to play a larger role during the decision making process of their treatments.
		Individualized care	Participants wanted to be treated as individuals and not 'just another case/patient' by the health care professionals.
		Continuity and Immediate 'Cure'	Participants appreciate the presence of one main carer(primary doctor) throughout their treatment process as it allowed continuity. They also valued the option of 'immediate cure', opting to go for a mastectomy instead of a lumpectomy as they felt that with a mastectomy, there is more assurance that the cancer would not recur.
		Establishment of Trust	Participants recognized the importance of being able to trust their doctor to take good care of them.
Relationship with family	Need for Communication with Family Members		Participants recognized the importance and need for communication with their family members but found it hard to discuss issues such as treatment plans and prognosis. They suggested that healthcare professionals could initiate such discussions with family members on their behalf.

## CONCLUSION

This pilot study has provided some insights into the experiences of breast cancer patients in Singapore. Participants expressed difficulty in navigating the healthcare system, perceived quality of care to be better in the private sector, valued being treated as individuals and wished healthcare professionals could initiate discussions of difficult topics with their family. Further research is needed to guide interventions that consider the complex and highly personalized nature of breast cancer treatments.

Members of the SingHealth Group

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