Midwives are in a key position to promote breast health awareness, writes Laura Horgan

MIDWIVES are in a prime position to provide advice and make significant contributions to women’s health in areas such as nutrition, breast feeding and smoking cessation. However, there is one area that requires more attention in midwifery practice: breast awareness.

Breast Cancer Awareness Month – run nationwide every October by Action Breast Cancer – highlights the responsibility of midwives to raise awareness about breast health among their patients.

Breast cancer contributes significantly to mortality and morbidity rates in Ireland, and is the greatest cause of premature deaths from cancer in women.1

With breast cancer, improvements can be made in health and quality of life through early detection, screening, diagnosis and treatment. Midwives therefore have a compelling responsibility to teach women how to do breast self-examination and to encourage its practice.2

There are about 200 different types of cancer and breast cancer is the second most common in Ireland. The disease is rare in women under 30, however women of all ages should always be breast aware.

Breast cancer is now seen as being preventable in many cases due in part to greater health promotion, which focuses on: primary prevention through health education and support for behavioural changes, such as frequent breast self-examination; and secondary prevention through early detection and treatment.

Some breast cancer risk factors such as early menstruation and late menopause, are not open to intervention, but others such as oral contraceptive use, obesity, excessive alcohol consumption, use of hormone replacement therapy and the protective effect of breast feeding, should be highlighted to women by midwives and other healthcare professionals, and through publicly available information from the HSE.3

Being breast aware means knowing what is normal for a particular person so that any unusual changes will be recognised. In Ireland, charities like Action Breast Cancer have developed websites with information regarding breast awareness.

Action Breast Cancer has also distributed a leaflet entitled ‘Know your breasts’ which informs women how to self examine their breasts. Leaflets enable women to access and utilise information, with explanatory diagrams, at a pace that suits.4 They are one of the most common methods of providing information regarding breast awareness and although they have shown some consistent results in raising awareness, there is less evidence that leaflets can change behaviour. Other initiatives on breast awareness are essential.5

Since 2000, the government-funded programme, BreastCheck, has been providing breast screening in Ireland to all women aged 50-64 every two years. This service is part of the HSE’s Cancer Control Programme. It aims to reduce breast cancer deaths by finding and treating the cancer at an early stage.6 The substantial decline in mortality from breast cancer is attributed to earlier diagnosis through screening programmes and better treatment, in particular tamoxifen.

Though screening may be effective, BreastCheck excludes women below 50 years, so other initiatives must be used to encourage women to take responsibility for their own breast awareness. This can be achieved through campaigns7 like Breast Cancer Awareness Month.8

The use of mass media in health promotion can be an effective method of promoting health to the wider population, as it can reach a large number of people simultaneously. It can increase knowledge and put breast health on the public agenda. However, mass media cannot provide face-to-face support, teach a skill or change strong attitudes or beliefs. Therefore, other programmes that contain interpersonal interactions are also necessary.9 For women over 50, this is provided in the form of BreastCheck; for women below this age, it is the responsibility of the healthcare professionals, namely GPs and midwives.

Midwives play a crucial role in breast health promotion. They must educate women about the functioning of the breast, encourage self-examination, and inform women that a healthy lifestyle with a varied diet and exercise plays an important role in preventing cancer.

According to initial findings of a long-term study of more than 500,000 people in 10 European countries, people with the most fat in their diet had twice the risk of breast cancer. Regardless of risk profile, all women should check their breasts once a month.

Where necessary, midwives can advocate for a woman to obtain a mammogram and can alert them to programmes such as the HSE’s Symptomatic Breast Clinic. Midwives must also recognise the vast impact that breast concerns have on a woman’s life and become familiar with conditions that are benign, so that correct reassurance can be provided.10

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References
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