

Needs Assessment for Breast Cancer Screening in Gozo

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The number of notified cancer cases in Gozo has shown a steady increase in the past years. In 1995, cancer accounted for more than a fourth of all deaths, and was second only to cardiovascular diseases among the most frequent causes of death in Gozo. In Gozo accounting for 15% of all cancers for the years 1993 to 1995. There were 114 new cases of cancer of the breast in females

between 1986 and 1995, both years inclusive. There was only one male breast cancer notified during the same period.

Cancer incidence and mortality rates were standardised using the Age Standardised Rates (ASR). The direct method was used. In this way effects of differences in age and other confounding variables are removed as far as possible when comparing two or more populations.

Though Gozo has slightly higher incidence rate of breast cancer when compared with that of Malta and other European countries, figure 3 above shows that.

A review of the literature shows that:

- Screening of post-menopausal women for breast cancer is effective in reducing mortality.
- To obtain optimal results, screening (by X-Ray, mammography) of women aged 50-69 years should occur every three years.
- The value of screening pre-menopausal women is debatable.
- Clinical breast examination is a less sensitive method than mammography. Its effectiveness in reducing mortality has not been proven.

From this study it was determined that the following situation applies for Gozo:

- Though the incidence rate for breast cancer in Gozo was slightly higher than that of Malta

Figure 1 : Trend in breast cancer incidence (Age Standardized Rate) 1986 - 1995

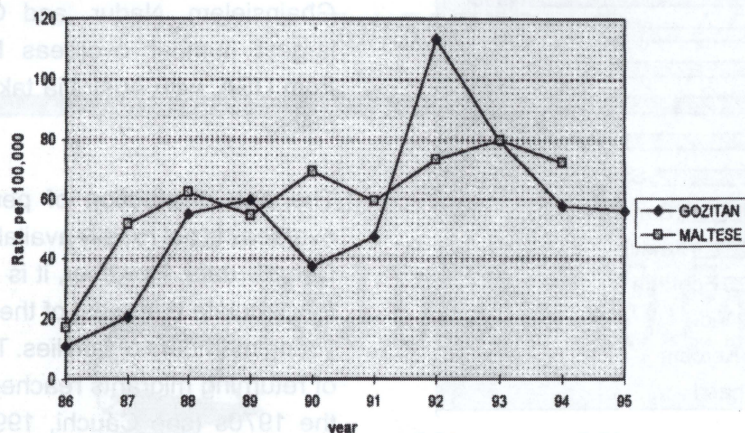


Figure 1: The frequency of breast cancer has been increasing in Gozo as well as in Malta, although it is not statistically significant. Such a trend would be consistent with other developed countries.

Figure 2 - Comparison of breast cancer incidence with other selected European rates

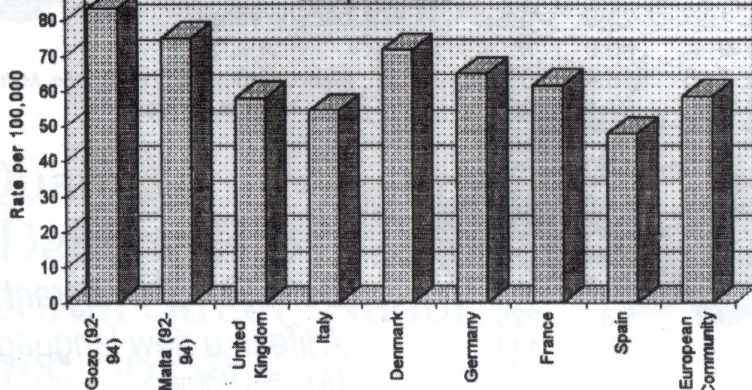


Figure 1: above shows that Gozo has a high rate of breast cancer when compared with other European countries.

and other European countries (Figure 2), the mortality rate from breast cancer was much lower than that of Malta and the other countries (Figure 3).

- These figures may be explained by the fact that there may be high awareness for breast cancer screening in Gozo on a voluntary basis. Such cases are detected at an early stage at which time appropriate treatment will avert the progression of the disease, leading to the present low mortality rates.
- Moreover, the positive predictive value for screening tests in question (calculated by using the 2 x 2 Contingency table) was low, leading to an unacceptable high percentage of false positive results. This would subject such patients to unnecessary further investigations and psychological trauma.

Recommendations

In view of the above it is recommended that only high risk individuals should be selected from the Medical out-patients register of the local Gozo General Hospital or referred by their general practitioner and offered screening with mammography every two years.

Figure 3: Comparison of breast cancer mortality with other selected European rates

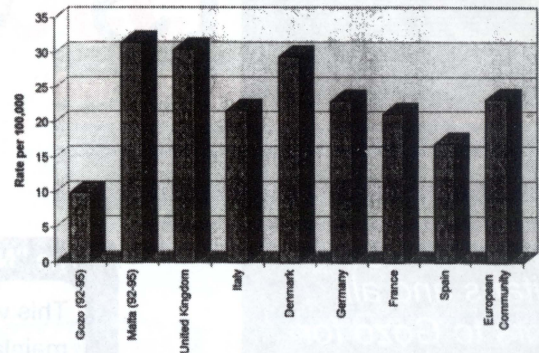


Figure 3: Mortality rate from breast Cancer in Gozo, compared with other countries.

A health education campaign should be launched to promote breast self-examination and clinical examination on a regular basis. This may increase awareness, which in turn may contribute to prompt diagnosis.

[This article is extracted from the theses entitled "Needs assessment for cancer screening in Gozo" submitted by author in part fulfillment for the Masters of Science degree in Public Health Medicine.]

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