

(Women's Special)

INDIA SE

THE MAGAZINE FOR
GLOBAL INDIANS

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Connecting & Inspiring
Indians Worldwide

**Madhuri
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EXCLUSIVE

DR UMA RAJAN

*Incredible
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**THE
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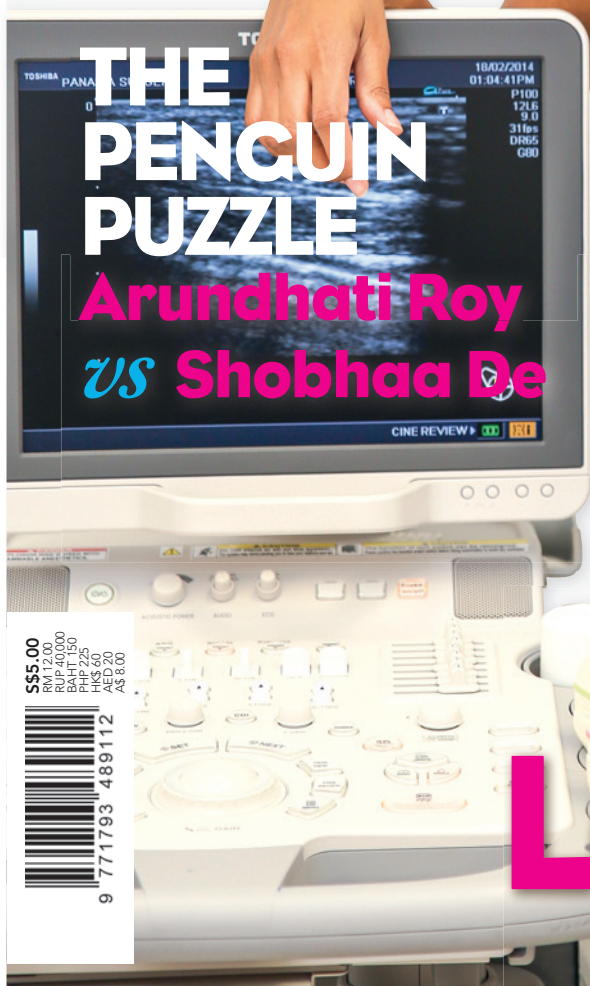
**Arundhati Roy
vs Shobhaa De**

**MEMORIES OF
A BENGALI
KITCHEN**

Basabi Banerjee

Breast Surgeon

**Dr Radhika
Lakshmanan**



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Think Pink

Breast cancer is the commonest cause of cancer deaths among women. Dr Radhika Lakshmanan specialises in Oncoplastic Breast Surgery and Breast Cancer Management.

By **NITHYA SUBRAMANIAN**



She is simple and down-to-earth.

When you meet her, she will instantly put you at ease and you will soon realise that Dr Radhika Lakshmanan has a safe pair of hands. Approachability is perhaps her most significant quality especially for someone specialising in Breast Cancer Surgery and Oncoplastic Breast Surgery. For this is one problem that many women ignore and are not very comfortable discussing freely. Lakshmanan's command over this field makes her a sought after speaker, as she often participates in educational sessions on breast cancer.

With over 15 years of experience as a surgeon, Lakshmanan is a Singaporean whose parents migrated from Kerala, India. A bright student, her fascination for medicine began when she saw doctors at work during her childhood visits. She secured her medical degree from the National University of Singapore in 1997, obtained her MRCS (Member of

the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh), followed by Masters in Medicine (General Surgery) and lastly obtained her FRCS (Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh).

Starting off as a general surgeon who was involved in the various aspects of surgery such as gut, veins, thyroid, she decided to specialise in breast cancer treatment as "this is something close to women. I wanted to embark on something more than what is already offered as standard care in Singapore, which is Oncoplastic Breast Surgery," Lakshmanan said. She is currently part of PanAsia Surgery- a one-stop multi-specialty Surgical Group Practice that provides personalised and comprehensive care for the full range of emergency and elective surgical problems.

Here are excerpts of an interview:

India Se: Could you please elaborate your area of specialisation in Oncoplastic Breast Surgery and



Breast Cancer Management?

Radhika Lakshmanan: I am a breast surgeon and my super sub-specialisation in breast surgery is Oncoplastic Breast Surgery. This refers to the adaptation of plastic surgery techniques in combination with cancer operation of the breast, which allows for an optimal aesthetic outcome for the patient. This technique has allowed women who, otherwise, may require mastectomy by standard techniques to opt for breast conservation. There are multiple techniques which can be applied hence the treatment is rather individualised to suit the patient concerned. This evolved in the late 90s in Europe but has not caught up in Asia very much.

I did a one-year long fellowship in Oncoplastic breast surgery in Nottingham, United Kingdom, which is a well established breast cancer centre.

As a breast surgeon, I am also trained in the various aspects of benign breast disease and breast cancer management and I play a key role in directing the patient to the relevant appropriate care where necessary such as medical oncology, who are doctors specialising in giving chemotherapy drugs and the radiation oncologists who are

specialists trained in radiation treatment as a form of additional treatment in cancer management. We work as a team to deliver the best care to the patient.

India Se: You also specialise in the use of endocrine therapy and older women with breast cancer. Please elaborate.

Radhika Lakshmanan: To explain briefly, endocrine treatment refers to the use of anti-hormonal drugs as an adjuvant (additional) form of therapy for the breast cancer patient. There are also a select group of elderly ladies who for some reason are not suitable for surgery for their cancer nor chemotherapy as the adverse effects may be more detrimental to them than the benefits of the chemo-drugs. In these cases, endocrine treatment as a primary modality of treatment is discussed. This also allows for good quality of life although this does not replace the standard treatment care plan.

India Se: Breast cancer seems to be commonly prevalent amongst women these days. Are there any specific reasons for this? What is the percentage of incidence amongst Indian/Asian women?

Radhika Lakshmanan: Worldwide breast cancer is the commonest cause of cancer-deaths in women. This has been attributed

to lifestyle changes over the years such as obesity; delaying pregnancy and having fewer children; increased smoking and alcohol intake. Few studies have looked at the incidence of breast cancer in Asians but generally it seems to parallel that in the West and in fact somehow Asian women seem to be presenting at an earlier age (30s-early 40s) than their western counterparts (late 40s-50s).

India Se: How can women detect breast abnormalities early on? Do you recommend regular mammography?

Radhika Lakshmanan: Early breast cancers are asymptomatic ie they do not have any physical manifestation in the early stages. Hence screening, mammography is advised yearly starting from the age of 40. Younger women who wish to get screened can do so with an ultrasound of the breasts as the sensitivity of mammography is less in younger women with dense breasts.

The other important aspect is to be aware of changes in the breast. Any new lumps or nipple discharge should be evaluated and she should consult a breast surgeon for advice.

India Se: At what stage do women generally come for treatment? And what are the



Most women fear that they will lose the breast once diagnosed. This needs to be dispelled immediately.

procedures involved? Could you elaborate on the success rates?

Radhika Lakshmanan: Most breast cancers at presentation in Singapore fall in Stage II-III. Success rates of treatment improves with earlier stages of cancer. Stage 0, what we call in-situ cancer or pre-cancer cells have a 5-year survival of 100 per cent which reduces to about 90 per cent for stage II and about 20 per cent for stage IV breast cancer.

I have to add these are average figures and it may not hold true for any two women with the same stage as prognosis is also determined by other factors such as tumour biology and baseline fitness level of each individual.

India Se: Please tell us what are the common fears/apprehensions that women with breast cancer have? How can these be mitigated?

Radhika Lakshmanan: A lot of women fear that they will lose the breast once diagnosed. That is one of the common reasons why they do not come forward in the early stages of the disease. They need to be engaged in more informative discussions on options available for treatment perhaps through the media. And the other fear most women have is stepping into the hospital.

Many women also tend to compare treatment outcomes of their friends or relatives and are afraid they may also succumb to the disease. Again what they fail to recognise is that every individual disease is different in terms of the stage and tumour biology which determines the final outcome. Not all women go through the same treatment protocol and it is individualised.

The other issue is that most people have the misconception that they will not be affected since there is no family history. But hereditary breast cancer accounts for less than 20 per cent of all breast cancers, again highlighting that screening is important.

Perhaps more community teaching addressing these issues may alleviate these fears.

India Se: How can families support a breast cancer patient especially if the patient has to undergo mastectomy?

Radhika Lakshmanan: I find that families and loved ones come closer in times of illness. This ensures a smooth recovery process



giving the patient strength and motivation to carry on. Most of my patients have been strong personalities as they are willing to go through everything with a positive attitude.

India Se: Recently Angelina Jolie voluntarily went for mastectomy for genetic reasons. What are your thoughts?

Radhika Lakshmanan: Having the BRCA 1&2 genes predispose the woman to about 45-60 per cent lifetime risk of developing cancer. Which also translates into 55 per cent chance of not developing cancer. It is a very personal choice, and one should only go through prophylactic (risk-reducing) double mastectomy after a complete understanding on the outcome. It is also very important for such an individual to have a strong family and socio-economic support before embarking on this track.

A less dramatic step would be to stay on a higher surveillance or screening once tested positive for the gene.

India Se: Tell us a little about yourself, background and formative years?

Radhika Lakshmanan: I am a Singaporean. My parents are migrant Indians, who've seen and participated in the development of this country. Hence, they believed in education and hard work to be successful in life and they have instilled the same values in me.

India Se: How supportive is your family given your hectic work schedule?

Radhika Lakshmanan: My mother has always been a strong pillar for me. It is only now that I have some time to spend with her and have a decent conversation. But I have to acknowledge the moral support, strength and help given by my parents, two siblings and close friends.

India Se: What are your other interests and hobbies?

Radhika Lakshmanan: I love travelling and meeting new people and being exposed to different cultures of the world. Music of all kinds especially jazz is also close to my heart. I also love to have a daily walk or run with my pet dog.

India Se: Anything else you wish to add?

Radhika Lakshmanan: I feel that Indian women should empower themselves with more information on their health and be responsible for their well-being. More often they are more concerned with the well-being of their own family in the process forgetting their own. Organisations such as the Breast Cancer Foundation of Singapore is also available to the public for any queries or support required for patients. ■

For enquiries or to schedule an appointment for screening, please contact (and quote 'Parkway East').

Parkway East Patient Assistance Centre

321 Joo Chiat Place, Singapore 427990

24-Hour Helpline: +65 6377 3737

Email: pepac@parkway.sg

www.parkwayeast.com.sg <wlmailhtml:www.parkwayeast.com.sg>



Keeping Indians Abreast Of Trends

The Indian Support Group is the newest group that is a safe platform to exchange ideas on breast cancer.

It is a proven fact that people who go through a life-threatening illness benefit from support groups, even if all the group can offer is a sense of camaraderie. Support groups are groups of people in similar life situations who meet on a regular basis to share their concerns. It is a safe place to exchange ideas about how to handle difficult and often intimate issues. Support groups can meet regularly in person, by telephone, or online.

In the case of breast cancer, patients and survivors often experience being isolated, physically bereaved or emotionally disconnected. These are issues that are often not addressed through their medical journey. Unique to this disease is a need to redefine sexuality and sexual relationships, feeling like a woman, and recovering a public confidence. Support groups can and do play a significant role in helping women through this cathartic and therapeutic transition.

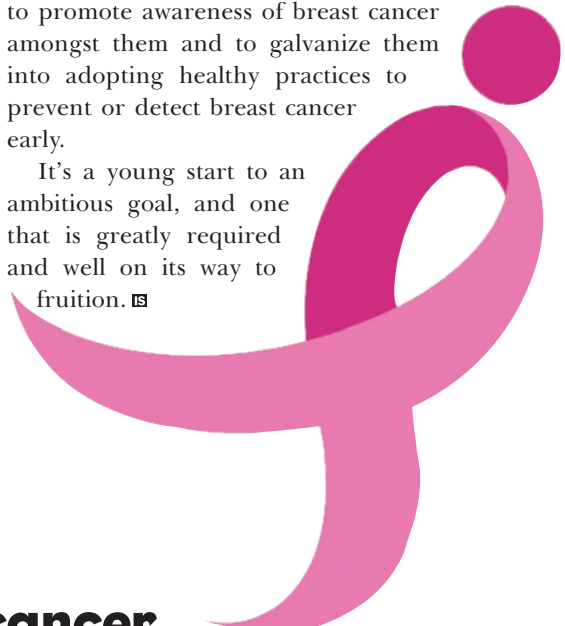
Breast Cancer Foundation (BCF) is a

non-profit organization established with the aim of eradicating breast cancer as a life-threatening disease. The formation of support groups, be it an English Support Group, a Mandarin one, or one for expatriates, is the brainchild of an extremely dedicated group of individuals working round-the-clock at BCF. And the newest kid on the block is the Indian Support Group.

Our members comprise well-educated bankers, lecturers, counselors, actresses, doctors, homemakers and much more. These women could be breast cancer survivors who have emerged victorious in their battles against the big C, newly diagnosed women hopeful of a cancer-free life, and women who want to offer their moral support to their fellow Indian sisterhood.

Particularly in Singapore, a multi-racial environment contributes to different ethnic groups relating differently to such life changing experiences. Groups that understand the nuances related to an ethnic group can offer better support. The

Indian Support Group at Breast Cancer Foundation has organised itself to build a community of members, volunteers, professionals, patients and survivors. From a small group of 5 women, the Indian Support Group has grown considerably. The group is resolute to use its shared experiences as a vehicle to reach out to Indians in Singapore, to promote awareness of breast cancer amongst them and to galvanize them into adopting healthy practices to prevent or detect breast cancer early.

It's a young start to an ambitious goal, and one that is greatly required and well on its way to fruition. 



Breast cancer patients and survivors often experience being isolated or emotionally disconnected. Support groups play a significant role in helping women through this cathartic and therapeutic transition.

Mother Courage

Rupini's boss is an icon for breast cancer survivors.

By **SHOBHA TSERING BHALLA**

Sivarani M Rajangam who runs an award-winning chain of beauty salons called Rupini's is an icon for Indian women in Singapore. This is not merely for her entrepreneurship skills but for her courage under fire. She is a breast cancer survivor who works tirelessly to inspire cancer patients through her Rupini's Divine Pink events.

Here are excerpts from an interview **India Se** had with her recently.

India Se: You are an inspiration for those who face serious health challenges like cancer, having surmounted it so bravely yourself. What was the most difficult part of the fight against the disease?

Sivarani: My life came to an abrupt stop when I heard from my doctor those dreadful three words "you have breast cancer – stage II." I was shell shocked. I left the doctor's office and sat in my car crying, "How could this happen to me?" I tried to hold myself together because my family would be upset, especially my daughter whom I had just sent overseas for her studies.

My business is about looking good. I had seen and heard how cancer treatment ravages your body and looks – without hair, eyebrows, lashes, leaving you a shadow of your former self. "How can I look like that in the public? Would I be able to face the public? Would others think less of me because of cancer?" I kept asking myself all the time.

I had to compose myself before I told my family and Rupini's management team. I said, "I have something to tell you. I have breast cancer and I need to have surgery." They were all quiet and I could hear some crying softly. I felt bad for them as I had always been a pillar of strength and they were unsure of what was going to happen to me. I forced myself to take one step at a time. I entrusted the running of my company to my management staff and assured my family that everything was going to be alright – though deep down I was still in a daze but trying to get the bad news off everyone's mind - me having cancer to go away.

Despite assurance from family and friends, you can never shake away the fear of death. I had read articles and heard of friends and family who had succumbed to death because of cancer. In the misery, I failed to read those who had overcome cancer. So, naturally, I thought that I was given a death sentence while in the prime of my life. In that darkest moment, I fell on the feet of my gods and cried. I was not prepared to die and I wanted to live. What about my daughter? I want to see her graduate, getting married and have her own family. "Why me, God!" I bawled in anguish.

Eventually, I realised that I was lucky because the lump was detected early. Also, prior to the cancer, I had signed up for a medical insurance which covered major illnesses; one of them was cancer.

India Se: How did you manage to run a successful business while

dealing with such a huge health problem?

Sivarani: It is about having a management team that you can trust and rely on. I left the running of my business to them as I underwent operations to remove the tumours and infected lymph nodes. While I was resting at home, they gave me daily, weekly and monthly reports. In my absence, my other directors took key decisions.

My oncologists were my heroes. They never failed to inspire. My healing too comes from my faith in God. There were nights when peace could be found and others when sleep did not come easily especially during my treatment. My spiritual faith flourished during these dark moments by leap and bounds.

India Se: What was your lifestyle like before the cancer?

Sivarani: I had a borderline lifestyle. I didn't exercise much except for occasional yoga classes. I slept late and constantly worried about my company's sales and performances each month. And I did not watch what I ate.

I changed my diet and lifestyle on the advice of my oncologists. My shopping for food and household products are now more stringent and I constantly read the labels. I have become an evangelist for organic food and healthy lifestyle.

What you are is what you think and believe. By constantly worrying, I realised that I was attracting negative energy towards me. I decided not only to change my lifestyle by sleeping early but pursued God through meditation and yoga. I drew on yoga to help myself physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

India Se: What is your lifestyle like now?

Sivarani: Now, I have a better perception to life and to look at your life in new ways. I learn to make healthier choice that can have positive effects in my life. I learnt to let go and to rely on my management to run my company. I begin to spend quality time with my loved ones and friends; especially my daughter and her studies.

India Se: You have become an icon for breast cancer awareness. What are the projects you hope to undertake to spread more awareness?

Sivarani: The Rupini's Divine Pink event was created by my company to highlight my personal journey and experience. It is not only a healing tool for myself, but I hope it will help someone else try to come to terms with it after they had to hear those devastating words "you have cancer". This year, we will be organising a marathon for cancer survivors, patients and their loved ones in collaboration with partners from the media industry. ■

