

Breast cancer screening by visually impaired women

Visually impaired women in Colombia and elsewhere are using their heightened sense of touch by working as medical tactile examiners (MTEs) to identify potentially cancerous growths in breast tissue.

Francia Papamija, a visually impaired MTE at the La Rivera Clinic in Cali, Colombia, examines around ten women a day. During the evaluation, which can last up to 45 min, she uses her fingertips to examine a woman's breasts, neck, and underarms. According to Dr Frank Hoffman, who created the Discovering Hands project (launched in Germany in 2006) and trains visually impaired women to become MTEs, visually impaired women can detect approximately 30% more tissue abnormalities than medics. Training takes around 9 months. Guided by Braille-marked adhesive strips, the MTE can report the precise location of any nodules or

lumps. However, MTEs do not make a diagnosis following the session. Instead, they decide whether the patient requires a further examination by a doctor.

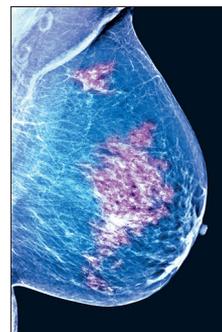
According to WHO, approximately 2 million women worldwide are diagnosed with breast cancer annually, of which 8000 are reported in Colombia. Deaths from breast cancer in Colombia have increased in recent years, which experts attribute to late diagnoses. Preventive mammography remains the gold standard in breast cancer screening, but the procedure is costly, only available in specialist institutions, and offered exclusively to women older than 50 years, despite the fact that breast cancer is increasingly diagnosed in younger age groups.

The examinations performed by the MTEs are offered to all women taking the Pap test. "Although many

women come without any symptoms, these tests serve a useful educational purpose, as here girls begin to learn about how important self-care is around breast cancer", Paulba Lucimi, chief nurse of the breast cancer programme at the La Rivera Clinic, told The Guardian newspaper.

There are also benefits for the MTEs themselves. Leidy Garcia, an MTE at the Meléndez Clinic in southern Cali, has examined more than 2500 patients. "I can contribute to the community", she told The Guardian. Of Colombia's visually impaired population of 500 000, 62% are unemployed, with vocational opportunities limited. Garcia continues, "It's also a good way to change the mindset of society, which usually patronises blind people, thinking we are not able to do many things."

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Dr P. Manazil / Science Photo Library

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