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ASIA EDITION

Asia Pacific Unites to Rewrite the Breast Cancer Equation

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Asia Pacific is intensifying efforts to address breast cancer through ASEANâ??s regional prioritisation, advances in targeted therapies and collaborative healthcare models that promote earlier detection, faster diagnosis and timely treatment. With HER2-positive breast cancer imposing significant health and economic costs, stronger publicâ??private partnerships, patient-centred care and investment in early intervention could improve survival, reduce healthcare burdens and help the region contribute to the WHO goal of saving 2.5 million lives from breast cancer by 2040.



Asia Pacific is helping set the next milestone in global action on breast cancer. ASEAN's latest decision to elevate breast cancer prevention and control as a regional health priority is one encouraging example of this momentum, marking the first time a cancer-related issue has been designated as a regional focus.

The region carries a disproportionate share of the global breast cancer burden, accounting for approximately 48 per cent of new breast cancer cases globally and 45 per cent of breast cancer deaths. At the same time, scientific progress is rapidly expanding the tools available to respond.

Take HER2-positive breast cancer, an aggressive sub-type that accounts for approximately 23 per cent of breast cancer cases in Asia. Until recently, it often had a poor prognosis. Advances in understanding how the HER2 protein drives tumour growth have enabled more targeted approaches and have helped improve outcomes in both early and advanced disease.

As science continues moving forward, this regional commitment to collective action creates a real opportunity to translate what's now possible into meaningful change for women, health systems and society.

Acting earlier for greater progress

What taking on this opportunity looks like may differ in each setting, as different economies have different starting points, resources and models of care. But progress is strongest when health systems help women with breast cancer to move quickly and smoothly from awareness and screening to diagnosis, treatment and follow-up.

For women, finding and treating breast cancer earlier can mean a stronger chance of survival; for society, it means greater opportunities to realise the full value of innovation. Evidence shows early-stage treatment is 2.5–3 times more cost-effective than treating metastatic disease and WHO analysis shows that every $1 invested in early diagnosis and comprehensive breast cancer care could generate up to $7.8 in returns.

When a woman is diagnosed and treated earlier, she is more likely to live longer in better health, with more time to pursue her goals, build a career, care for others and contribute to her community. Earlier intervention can also reduce pressure on health systems by preventing avoidable complications, reducing the need for more intensive care and easing pressure on health workforce capacity.

New research from the independent economic research institute WifOR, commissioned by Roche, brings the scale of the opportunity into focus for Asia Pacific. Covering 11 Asia Pacific economies with diverse health systems and economic contexts, the study estimates that between 2017 and 2027, HER2-positive breast cancer alone will result in approximately 4 million years of healthy life lost and an estimated $116 billion in productivity losses. The study also assessed Roche HER2-positive breast cancer medicines. It estimates they are associated with around 21,300 quality-adjusted life years (QALYs) and $1.65 billion in social impact over the same period, with 63 per cent of that impact coming from women treated early. QALYs reflect both living longer and living with better quality of life.

Together, these findings strengthen the case for treating breast cancer earlier as a health and socioeconomic opportunity which the region is increasingly moving towards.

Adapting care delivery with collective action and shared accountability

Ensuring every woman with breast cancer can get high-quality care when and where they need it is not an easy task, particularly in a highly diverse region like Asia Pacific, where care pathways, capacity and geography vary widely. Today, up to 25 per cent of patients in Asia are still diagnosed when their breast cancer has already spread to other parts of the body.

Adapting the way care is delivered for earlier detection, faster diagnosis, and quicker connection to appropriate treatment requires whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches. This is where more coordinated action and stronger implementation across the region can help accelerate progress for women, and for the health systems that serve them.

The region already has successful collaborations underway. Indonesia is developing a unified National Breast Cancer Action Plan aligned with the WHO Global Breast Cancer Initiative, supported by city-level pilots in Jakarta and Yogyakarta. These pilots bring together ecosystem mapping, shared governance, patient navigation, and public–private–community partnership, with lessons intended to inform broader national implementation.

In Malaysia, similar collaborations are enabling more flexible models of care and mobilising wider health-system capacity to bring cancer services closer to women in their communities. For example, the country is scaling from a single national hub to eight regional centres, complemented by district-level clinics that extend access into local communities. In Sabah, a Nursing Privileging Programme has enabled certified local nurses to administer systemic therapies nearer to patients. This approach has since been incorporated into the national nursing curriculum in partnership with the government.

Roche works alongside health systems and partners on these efforts, contributing scientific expertise and practical experience, so that advances in science translate into real-world impact for women.

With ASEAN establishing a regular regional breast cancer policy dialogue, there will be more opportunities to share effective models of collaboration like these across health systems. Lessons from implementation on the ground can help countries adapt and scale proven approaches, while informing the design of more connected and responsive care systems.

What comes next

The WHO Global Breast Cancer Initiative set the goal of saving 2.5 million lives by 2040. Asia Pacific has a critical role to play in reaching this target. Decisions and actions on how we value, prioritise and deliver breast cancer care earlier and at scale will have a deep and lasting impact on women, health systems and societies. With advances in science, stronger partnerships and growing leadership, the region is well positioned to translate ASEAN’s priority into practical implementation.

The value of this work will be counted first in women’s health, and then in what healthier women can contribute to their families, workplaces and communities. Beyond the region, Asia Pacific’s experience can also offer a practical reference point for global progress on breast cancer and for the broader cancer care community.

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