

Improved Survival for Advanced Breast Cancer Patients

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- *The treatment landscape for advanced breast cancer has greatly improved over the last four decades to include different therapy options according to patients' molecular subtype*
- *Improvement in the breast cancer space has led to improved survival rate and quality of life for advanced breast cancer patients*
- *Novartis Malaysia holds a media workshop to empower breast cancer patients diagnosed in advanced stages by equipping them with further knowledge on their condition and treatment options*

Kuala Lumpur, 21 October 2021 — Approximately one in 19 Malaysian women are at risk of this condition[i], with more than 60% diagnosed at advanced stages[ii]. Receiving a diagnosis in later stages can often leave patients feeling hopeless, as there is a common perception that the chances of survival are relatively low. However, this is no longer the case with medical advancements. In conjunction with breast cancer awareness month, Novartis Malaysia initiated a workshop, “**Staying Hopeful, Staying Strong: Surviving Advanced Breast Cancer**”, to empower patients and caregivers.

Dr Vaishnavi Jeyasingam, Consultant Oncologist from Kuala Lumpur General Hospital, shared, “Advanced breast cancer (ABC) refers to Stage IV disease whereby cancer has spread to other parts of the body. Common sites of spread in breast cancers are to the lungs, liver, bones and brain. Although disease at this stage is not curable, advancements in treatment options including chemotherapy, radiation, immunotherapy and targeted therapies have improved patient outcomes significantly. The improvement that we see in treatment responses and survival is coupled with less side effects and maintains good quality of life among patients.

“In the last decade, we have seen major advancements in the field of breast cancer classification whereby it has been clearly proven that not all breast cancers behave the same way. Breast cancers are classified generally into hormone positive, HER2-positive and triple negative cancers. This has led to treatment which is tailored to this classification as well as the patient’s background, medical problems, social and logistic needs. With good treatment and patient selection, many patients experience improved long-term outcomes and survival.

“Cancer survivorship which encompasses the physical, mental, social and financial aspects of the patient, families and caregivers further enhance good coping mechanisms for all who are involved in the journey. All these as a joint effort, has enabled many to have a more fulfilling experience which facilitates one’s acceptance of the disease and being at peace as a whole.”

In ABC, the main form of treatment is systemic drug therapies, which means the medication travels throughout

a patient's bloodstream to reach cancer in all parts of the body[iii].

Dr Azura Rozila Ahmad, Consultant Oncologist from Beacon Hospital in Petaling Jaya, shared, *"It is important to note that not all breast cancers are the same. Advancements in oncology have enabled us to define breast cancer at the molecular or even gene expression level. Over the past four decades, this innovation has led to treatment options that increase a patient's survival rate and quality of life. For example, if the patient's molecular subtype is identified as hormone receptor-positive (HR+), the oncologist will distinguish hormones as the main driver in fuelling breast cancer. Thus, hormone therapy may be suitable in treating and managing the patient[iv]. Additionally, when targeted therapy is added on to hormonal therapy for ABC HR+ patient, the survival outcome is significant longer.*

"For patients who have a surplus of a growth-promoting protein known as HER2 on their cancer cells, their condition is referred to as HER2-positive breast cancer. Targeted drug therapies can attach to the HER2 protein on cancer cells, preventing the cells from growing. When combined with chemotherapy, the medication binds itself to the HER2 protein on cancer cells, bringing the chemo directly to them[v].

"These are only a few of the many options ABC patients have. The future is exciting, as we anticipate more effective drugs will become available that hopefully will further improve the outlook for ABC patients. Even now, we are already seeing patients living substantially longer without their disease getting worse using newer treatment options. With the availability of various therapies, selection of treatments can be customised and personalised according to the patient's unique profile. This is a crucial advantage that contributed to the survival rate of ABC patients, as it is no longer one-size-fits-all. A patient's condition is treated according to its individual characteristics. ABC patients need to know that their diagnosis is not a hopeless situation, and their oncologists can advise on the best route according to their unique condition."

Mohamed Elwakil, General Manager Malaysia & Brunei, Novartis Oncology, shared that *"At Novartis Malaysia, we are committed to supporting the breast cancer community on their journey. We want patients to know that hope is not lost and there are treatments available that have shown positive results. Four decades ago, patients only had the treatment option of radiation, chemotherapy or mastectomies.*

Now, with the identification of breast cancer subtypes, treatment options have expanded across our healthcare systems. In light of this, our government is working tirelessly to improve access to innovative medicines, and thus, we want patients to have active consultations with oncologists on their treatment options. We hope that this workshop was successful in equipping the public with expert opinion and a patient perspective to empower them to take an active role in managing ABC."

Fara Aida Farid, a breast cancer survivor, was diagnosed in 2010. She shared, *"Upon receiving news of my diagnosis, my oncologist advised me to undergo chemotherapy. However, I was reluctant as I have heard about the many side effects chemotherapy has, especially the fatigue and hair loss it causes. I decided to not proceed with this and to try out herbal remedies instead.*

"Unfortunately, four years later, I found out that my cancer had spread. Nevertheless, my oncologist informed me that there is still a chance to reduce my cancer progression with conventional medication. To help me address my concerns about chemotherapy, my oncologist introduced me to another patient who bravely underwent this treatment. Her resilience gave me the courage I needed to overcome my fears and do what was necessary to regain my life.

"Today, I am on targeted and hormone therapy, and my condition is well managed. I live a wholesome life and lead an active lifestyle with my horse-riding hobby. My advice to those facing breast cancer is to remain positive and speak to your oncologist about your treatment options. If you have any concerns about medication or lifestyle changes, talk to them about it. Invest in your health, read up about your condition, and

make the necessary adjustment to combat cancer. Breast cancer treatment has come a long way, and we should capitalise on the access to innovative medications.”

About Novartis

Novartis is reimagining medicine to improve and extend people’s lives. As a leading global medicines company, we use innovative science and digital technologies to create transformative treatments in areas of great medical need. In our quest to find new medicines, we consistently rank among the world’s top companies investing in research and development. Novartis products reach nearly 800 million people globally and we are finding innovative ways to expand access to our latest treatments. About 108,000 people of more than 140 nationalities work at Novartis around the world. Find out more at <https://www.novartis.com>.

About Novartis Malaysia

Novartis Malaysia has been present in Malaysia since 1971. Following the merger of Sandoz and Ciba-Geigy, Novartis was formed in 1996. In 2015, Kuala Lumpur was chosen as one of the five Novartis Global Service Centres which delivers a broad variety of services to the Novartis group of companies worldwide. Services offered by the Kuala Lumpur team include IT, People & Organization Services, FRA Operations, Procurement Services, Real Estate & Facilities Services and CONEXTS contributor by Clinical Research Malaysia in sponsored research with 16 research projects, leading the market of other healthcare players in this sponsored research space.

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Melissa Hon

Country Head Communications & Engagement (C&E)

melissa.hon@novartis.com

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