

Breast reconstruction: the Indian story

Opinion

Breast reconstruction is an integral part of recovery from Breast Cancer. It restores the quality of life and body image of the breast cancer survivors. This is an important step towards rehabilitation. Immediate breast reconstruction not only avoids a future surgery but also prevents any psychological trauma associated with breast removal. According to Dikshit et al.¹ Breast cancer is the most common cancer in India with an incidence rate of 20.1%. These cases are likely a result of lifestyle change which are more suited for the western countries. Even when the incidence of breast cancer is rising, women opting for breast reconstruction surgery are uncommon.¹

In a survey done by Kothari et al, the only survey done in India about breast reconstruction surgery, some interesting surfaced. Out of the 1000 participants who were asked to fill a questionnaire about breast cancer, only 226 knew about reconstructive options after carcinoma breast. Interestingly, when the data was analyzed according to age, it was seen that older age group had a better knowledge about reconstruction than the younger group.² This clearly shows that the main reason why women don't opt for breast reconstruction is lack of awareness. Most of the women don't inquire about reconstructive options since they don't even know that they exist. Moreover, breast cancer in India is usually diagnosed at advanced stages which leave the patient with limited time. During this the main goal of the patient is to survive the radiotherapy and chemotherapy, reconstruction is not even on their mind.³

Thirdly, this is the age of limited financial resources. For a person undergoing aggressive mastectomy, reconstruction is a secondary expenditure. Since it is essentially a plastic surgery, the costs are very high. A majority of the population in India is not equipped to shell that much money. This leads them to live their life without a part of their body. The familial pressure on the women undergoing Mastectomy is tremendous in our country. In such conditions they are not allowed to take decisions about their bodies. Their family decides the procedures to be done, and they are not that supportive of reconstruction, due to either lack of awareness or financial crisis.

Another reason that stops Indian women from going for reconstructions are the myths around it. Commonest of them being that reconstructing their breast would bring back the cancer. This fear of relapse holds them back from opting for a surgery that would

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enhance their quality of life. In conclusion, it would not be wrong to say that the reason for low numbers of breast reconstruction in India is lack of awareness/counselling. Any lady undergoing Mastectomy should be counseled about reconstructive options by her Surgeon or Physician. They need to be told that breast reconstruction is not a separate procedure but a part of complete treatment. Educating and empowering women to make informed choices will lead to a better treatment outcome.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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