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# Improving Breast Cancer Survivorship in the Philippines:

Policy and Program  
Implications from  
The Pink Initiative

Philippine  
Cancer  
Society



  
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# 1 Overview

Maria, a 48-year-old single mother of two, faced the grim reality of breast cancer at a private hospital. While her HMO insurance covered just one chemotherapy session, the treatment costs were intimidating. Though Maria explored multiple avenues for support, including family and government aid, the paperwork and processes were daunting. Notably, the trust she had built with her medical team and the emotional support from her patient group were valuable aspects she could not quickly leave behind.

The Philippines faces a significant challenge with breast cancer, the most common type of cancer in the country with the highest incidence. The Pink Initiative, a collaborative effort by the Swiss Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines, the Philippine Cancer Society, ICanServe Foundation, and Novartis Healthcare Philippines, addressed this challenge through multistakeholder roundtable discussions (Novartis, 2023). These discussions were dedicated to mapping the patient journey, promoting early diagnosis and treatment awareness, informing patients about innovations, and enhancing public knowledge of collaborative efforts to improve breast cancer care.

Aligned with global health events, the series engaged key healthcare institutions and leaders, who provided invaluable insights into the patient journey and care improvements. The Department of Health (DOH) outlined its support through programs emphasizing early cancer detection and comprehensive care. Novartis Healthcare Philippines champions patient-centered care, focusing on personalized therapies and patient empowerment.

Each session of the series explored different aspects of breast cancer care. Topics included the importance of collaborative efforts, the National Integrated Cancer Control Act (NICCA) implementation, and the challenges posed by late diagnosis and treatment access. Discussions also covered the role of CEOs in healthcare, the importance of psychosocial care, and the need to counter medical misinformation.

The series concluded with a "Manifesto of Support for Patient Survivorship<sup>1</sup>," committing to the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Breast Cancer Initiative targets, namely Health Promotion for Early Detection (achieve diagnosis of at least 60% of invasive cancers at Stage I-II), Timely Diagnosis (evaluation, imaging, tissue sampling done within 60 days), and Comprehensive Breast Management (80% have undergone entire course of multimodality treatment and successful return home) (WHO, 2023). This initiative represents a significant step toward improving breast cancer care in the Philippines. It offers hope and support to patients and their families.

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<sup>1</sup>Survivorship in cancer care is about the journey and life of a person after their primary cancer treatment has ended. It includes dealing with physical, mental, social, and financial issues. It also involves managing the side effects of treatment, improving life quality, and dealing with emotions. It can also include future cancer treatments if needed. The experience of family members, friends, and caregivers is also part of survivorship. Each person's survivorship experience is unique to them (European Society for Medical Oncology, 2017).



# 2 Discussants

## Organizers/Discussants

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Rachel Rosario, MD, Philippine Cancer Society

Kara Magsanoc-Alikpala, ICanServe Foundation

Joel Chong, Novartis Healthcare Philippines

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## Discussants

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# 3 Session Summaries

The Pink Initiative roundtable series, a concerted effort to address breast cancer in the Philippines, convened key stakeholders to strategize improving patient outcomes. Spanning five insightful sessions, the series provided a platform for sharing experiences, challenges, and best practices in breast cancer care. Each session focused on a distinct aspect of the patient journey, fostering a dialogue on policy and program implications. The following summaries capture the essence of these discussions, reflecting the country's commitment to advancing breast cancer management.

## Session 1 (July 12, 2023)

### *Defining the Journey, Raising Awareness, and Championing Survivorship*

The inaugural session set the stage by mapping the breast cancer patient journey, emphasizing the critical need for early diagnosis and robust support mechanisms to enhance survivorship. Presenters shared alarming statistics and survivors' narratives, highlighting the transformative impact of breast cancer and the imperative of timely care. Speakers from healthcare, advocacy, and patient support groups stressed the importance of education on breast cancer symptoms and regular screenings.

The concept of survivorship was a focal point, with discussions on the need for long-term care plans and psychological support for survivors. The session identified gaps in survivorship support and advocated for a continuum of care that empowers patients throughout their journey. The call to action was clear: strengthen survivorship programs to ensure patients have the resources and community support needed for life after cancer treatment.



# 3 Session Summaries

## Session 2 (July 26, 2023)

### *Leveraging NICCA for Enhanced Patient Outcomes*

Session two highlighted the importance of partnerships in improving breast cancer care, aligning with the WHO Global Breast Cancer Initiative (WHO, 2023), and implementing NICCA (Official Gazette, 2019). It focused on the patient journey, the impact of breast cancer on patients' lives, and the necessity of a patient-centric approach to cancer care.

Participants examined NICCA's potential to transform breast cancer care in the Philippines. Policymakers, healthcare providers, and patient advocates discussed strategies for NICCA's effective implementation, emphasizing its comprehensive approach to cancer management. NICCA is poised to foster a more patient-centric healthcare system, aiming to improve survival rates and the quality of life for breast cancer patients.

## Session 3 (August 9, 2023)

### *Enhancing Navigation in Health Care and Patient Support*

The third session continued exploring challenges such as late diagnosis and access to treatment. It highlighted collaborative efforts to meet WHO Global Breast Cancer Initiative targets and NICCA's role in a multidisciplinary approach to care. The session underscored the importance of equipping patients with knowledge and support to navigate their cancer journey, reducing uncertainty, and enhancing quality of life.

Patient navigation emerged as a critical theme. Navigators guide individuals and patients through the healthcare system, ensuring they understand breast health and cancer treatment options and providing continuous support. This role is vital for successful women's and patient empowerment and treatment outcomes.



# 3 Session Summaries

## **Session 4 (August 22, 2023)**

### *Leadership and Comprehensive Care in Breast Cancer Management*

The fourth session focused on the crucial role of healthcare leadership in advancing breast cancer care. It emphasized healthcare executives' influence in promoting patient-centered care and innovation. The session also addressed the challenge of medical misinformation and the need for reliable health education to encourage early detection and treatment adherence.

The session advocated for integrated care models that include mental health support and recognizing the emotional and psychological toll on patients. The consensus was that multi-dimensional strategies are essential in policy and program development to enhance patient care and survivorship.

## **Session 5 (August 31, 2023)**

### *Commitment to Survivorship and Community-Centered Care*

The final session highlighted the urgency of enhancing breast cancer care, with a focus on early detection and comprehensive care. Discussions pointed to financial barriers leading to delayed treatments and the potential of community-centered care to provide continuous support, which is crucial for long-term survivorship.

The series concluded with signing a “Manifesto of Support for Patient Survivorship”, symbolizing the collective resolve to improve patient outcomes and emphasizing the need to overcome misinformation and financial obstacles for accessible and effective breast cancer treatment.



# 4 Unmet patient needs and challenges

The patient journey reveals challenges beyond clinical care, highlighting the need for comprehensive policies and programs addressing medical and socio-economic health dimensions. The journey can be broken down into the following critical steps, each with its own challenges and policy implications:

## 4.1

**Awareness:** Even before the individual or patient goes to any healthcare provider or health facility for wellness or sickness checkup, access to quality information is crucial to ensure patients are informed of essential information, such as those related to their conditions, options for health management, and costs associated with care. This is a critical stage that traditional patient journeys typically neglect. Key players in the entire healthcare ecosystem (e.g., providers, government, patients, families, and caregivers) usually think the patients' first contact is the primary healthcare providers at the rural health units or health centers. The primary healthcare system does not need to wait for patients to visit health centers. Proactive approaches may be used to reach patients and provide the necessary information even before they seek care.

- **Challenge:** The gap in patient access to quality information necessitates policies mandating the dissemination of accurate and comprehensive health information. Programs should be developed to proactively reach out to communities, providing education on breast health, cancer symptoms, screening, and treatment options.
- **Policy and program implications:** Implement community outreach programs and educational campaigns to increase awareness and knowledge of breast health and cancer.

## 4.2

**Patient navigation:** The continuous act of figuring out what to do, where to go, what to do next, who to see, how much to pay, and how to seek financial assistance could be daunting and stressful for individuals, patients, and their families. Upon positive screening and clinical diagnosis, on top of dealing with breast cancer, patients and their families also face difficulties in navigating the complex healthcare system.

- **Challenge:** Navigating the healthcare system is complex, and policies that simplify the process for individuals, patients, and their families are needed.
- **Policy and program implications:** Strengthen and implement navigation programs at scale to guide individuals and patients nationwide through the healthcare system, ensuring they understand and can access their benefits.





# 4 Unmet patient needs and challenges

## 4.3

**Initial checkup with the primary care provider:** Even with quality information and the intention to seek care, patients might be unable to attend the initial checkup because of specific gaps at the health facility level and overall social determinants of health<sup>2</sup>. For example, the health center physician might be unavailable because the physician is rotating with another health center or attending a meeting or training session. Additionally, patients might not have money for transportation to the nearest health facility, or the health center is open only on weekdays during working hours, and the patients can only go to the health center after work hours or weekends when they do not have work. Going for checkups during workdays may entail work hours lost and, hence, a deduction in their pay.

- **Challenge:** The gap in patient access to primary care highlights the need for DOH and Local Government Units (LGUs) to implement policies that ensure the availability of healthcare providers and address barriers such as easy access to validated social media self-education/self-assessment educational videos, a women's health care clinic, transportation, and community scheduling.
- **Policy and program implications:** In the community, particularly under LGUs, expand primary care services and hours, provide accessible and validated social media self-education/self-assessment educational videos, set up a mobile or a dedicated stationary women's early cancer detection clinic, and provide transportation assistance to low-income families to ensure patients can access initial checkups.

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<sup>2</sup>The social determinants of health are pivotal in shaping the patient journey, as they encompass a broad range of socioeconomic factors that directly impact access to healthcare and outcomes. In the Philippines, where economic disparities and social inequities persist, these determinants play a crucial role in the high incidence of late-stage breast cancer diagnoses. Addressing these determinants is essential for creating equitable health policies and programs to effectively bridge the gaps in breast cancer care (World Health Organization, 2019).



# 4 Unmet patient needs and challenges

## 4.4

### **Cancer screening-early detection and diagnosis by an oncologist:**

Similarly, even after the initial checkup with the primary care provider, some patients cannot undergo cancer screening-early detection and diagnosis by an oncologist. The reasons may be related to the availability of cancer screening, early detection procedures, and specialists. Moreover, social determinants of health also determine patient access to cancer screening, such as early diagnosis and diagnosis. The absence of adequate health insurance coverage means that the patient and the patient's family will shoulder the transportation cost to the health facility and expenses for breast cancer screening, early detection, and diagnosis.

- **Challenge:** The gap in patient access to screening-early detection and diagnosis underscores the importance of policies under DOH and LGUs that increase the availability of screening-early cancer detection procedures and specialists.
- **Policy and program implications:** DOH and LGUs invest in healthcare infrastructure, manpower, equipment, materials, and an education-information campaign to increase the availability of cancer screening, early detection, and diagnostic services.

# 4 Unmet patient needs and challenges

## 4.5

**Treatment:** Not all patients who undergo cancer screening-early detection and are found positive for breast cancer will be able to proceed with treatment. The substantial cost of treatment presents a significant barrier in the patient journey. In the Philippines, where the healthcare system primarily operates on a self-pay basis and health insurance coverage is limited, the financial burden of breast cancer treatment can be catastrophic. A typical treatment regimen starts at 6,000 USD (Hornillos, 2022). The Philippine Health Insurance Corporation, commonly known as PhilHealth, provides some relief by covering up to 2,000 USD for stages 0 to III-A under its Z Benefit Package, barely covering diagnostics and surgery (Philippine Health Insurance Corporation, 2019). However, considering that the average Filipino family earns approximately 5,600 USD annually and spends about 4,200 USD (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022), these costs are far beyond the reach of many. The DOH Breast Cancer Medicine Access Program (BCMAP) covers adjuvant chemotherapy and trastuzumab of patients of the DOH Cancer and Supportive-Palliative Medicine Access Program (CSPMAP) access sites. A separate case rate PhilHealth coverage for radiotherapy can be used.

- **Challenge:** The significant financial barrier to treatment necessitates policies that expand health insurance coverage and BCMAP and reduce patients' out-of-pocket expenses.
- **Policy and program implications:** Facilitate access to medicines by streamlining the Health Technology Assessment (HTA) process and enhancing the PhilHealth Z Benefit Package, BCMAP, and other financial assistance programs to increase access sites and cover a broader range of treatments and disease stages.

## 4.6

**Post-treatment care and monitoring:** While the biggest hurdle is the treatment stage, keeping patients healthy and remission-free is also essential. Unfortunately, post-treatment care is a challenge for breast cancer patients (Breastcancer.org, 2024). After the appropriate treatment, the transition to primary care and home care must be seamless to prevent remission and rehospitalization. Besides cost considerations, access to caregivers, especially within the family or community, is critical for continuous recovery.

- **Challenge:** The gap in access to post-treatment care calls for policies, particularly from the LGUs under the Universal Health Care (UHC) Law, that support seamless transitions to primary and home care to help prevent remission and rehospitalization.
- **Policy and program implications:** Develop LGU-UHC programs that support post-treatment care, including home care services and caregiver training.



# 5 Summary of Policy and Program Implications

The identified challenges in the breast cancer patient journey in the Philippines have profound implications for policy and program development. The lack of access to quality information underscores the need for comprehensive health education initiatives that reach individuals before they enter the healthcare system. Policies must support proactive nationwide dissemination of easily accessible breast health information to empower individuals with the knowledge necessary to seek timely medical attention.

The barriers to primary care and specialist services, including the availability of healthcare providers and the costs associated with care, call for reforms in healthcare delivery systems. These may include expanding the availability of healthcare professionals in underserved areas, extending health center operating hours, providing breast cancer screening-early detection services in the community, enhancing access to cancer diagnostic and treatment centers, and integrating health services from the community to the tertiary hospitals and back to the community to ensure continuity of care.

Furthermore, the financial burden of treatment and post-treatment care highlights the necessity for a streamlined HTA review process, specifically for including medicines and devices in the Philippine National Formulary and Philippine Essential Medical Device List. This is directly linked to robust health financing policies aligned with the UHC, NICCA, and Regional Specialty Centers Law. Enhancing PhilHealth coverage and benefits could alleviate the economic strain on patients and their families, making life-saving treatments more accessible.

The complexity of navigating the healthcare system requires patient healthcare navigation programs that can guide patients through each step of their journey. Policymakers and program developers must consider these factors to create a more patient-centered healthcare system that addresses the unique challenges faced by breast cancer patients in the Philippines.



# 6 Conclusion

The Pink Initiative roundtable series has illuminated the multifaceted challenges and opportunities within the Philippine breast cancer care landscape. We have charted a course toward a more responsive and patient-centered healthcare system through collaborative dialogue and shared insights. A breast cancer patient's journey is complex and deeply personal, yet it is a journey that no one should have to navigate alone.

As we conclude this series, we reflect on the collective wisdom gathered and the shared commitment to improving the lives of those affected by breast cancer. The discussions have provided a platform for advocacy and fostered a community united by a common cause. The insights from these sessions serve as a beacon, guiding us toward a future where every Filipino can access comprehensive care, informed policy-making, and empowered survivorship.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all participants, supporters, and advocates who have contributed to the Pink Initiative. Your dedication and passion fuel the ongoing efforts to enhance breast cancer care in the Philippines. While this series may have reached its conclusion, its inspired work continues. The knowledge and strategies shared here will resonate in our actions and the policies we advocate for long into the future.

Together, we have taken the necessary first steps in the long path ahead. Let us carry forward the momentum generated by the Pink Initiative, hoping that our collective efforts will lead to lasting change and a brighter tomorrow for breast cancer care in the Philippines.



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Let's be done!  
4/28



Swiss Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines

Screening! Save lives!

Quality and Value based Care!  
Ramon

Hope saves lives

M. Franca

Padayon!

There is hope!  
GAP

Let's do it, take the lead!  
Eugene Ramos

Philippine Cancer Society



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KAYANG KUNG KAYA KUNG SAMANG SAMANG JING CANTONEDA

# CALL TO ACTION: MANIFESTO FOR IMPROVING SURVIVORSHIP

Go fight cancer!  
Rachael

IMPLEMENT NICCA ASAP

Pre-Symptoms  
The gaps toward better cancer outcomes

The government is with you in this fight!  
DOH  
Vince

Rising Strong!  
COH  
SUMBEC

ditto  
what she said!

Keep the fight  
Keep the Faith!

All systems go for NICCA!  
Chris Fajana

Congratulations  
COH-SURGI  
Mae Coronado  
Lucy Brandy

Keep the faith - FIGHT Cancer & Abuse

Gianla

ICs  
MADEL  
SIDCHY

COH and Canserve  
Mady Baldonino

We support Jackal

LET US PRIORITIZE PSYCHOSOCIAL CARE.  
- Bill Ramos

Together Every body Achievers move!

Keep up the fight  
the fight never stops  
Joyce Rites

WE CAN DO THIS! THINK POSITIVE!  
Reekie ICS

Full NICCA implementation with stakeholders  
- Jan Labrador

Let us all work together, through Private-Public Partnerships to overcome this issue, together!

Stanna Fracki

Proper Nutrition is important for Cancer patients  
- Maricar Escoto

Let's work together to fight breast cancer!  
- Prof. COA and Estery  
Juel Ching LUSPH

Let's do this!  
Angela ay

ONCOLOGISTS ARE ALWAYS HERE TO BUILD AND SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE HEALTHCARE

Judy



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