

Dr Raghu Ram Pillarisetti of the KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre for Breast Diseases in Hyderabad explains why counselling is a vitally important component of cancer care

Accounting for 26.6% of all cancers among women, breast cancer is the most common cancer in India, according to the World Health Organisation. Spreading awareness and adopting new diagnostic and treatment protocols are key to a more robust fight against breast cancer. To explain it better for our readers, we spoke to Dr Raghu Ram Pillarisetti, the founding director and consultant surgeon of the KIMS-Ushalakshmi Centre for Breast Diseases in Hyderabad. Last week, he was conferred an honorary fellowship of the American Surgical Association (ASA) — the highest recognition that the ASA can bestow upon a non-American surgeon. Edited excerpts:

What is breast cancer and where does it arise?

Breast tissue is made up of ducts and lobules. Breast cancer occurs when a single cell in the breast begins to divide and grow abnormally. There are different types of breast cancer — also known as carcinoma.

Broadly, breast cancer arising from the ducts is referred to as ductal carcinoma (the most common form of breast cancer) and cancer arising from the lobules is referred to as lobular carcinoma. It is important that doctors have an accurate diagnosis so that they can plan the most appropriate treatment for the individual.

How serious is the burden of breast cancer in India?

With some 2 lakh new cases being diagnosed every year, the incidence of breast cancer has overtaken cervical cancer to become the most common cancer affecting women in India. What is more alarming is that it is being increasingly diagnosed at a younger age (a decade earlier) in India compared to the West.

Due to a lack of awareness and the absence of a robust population-based screening programme, more than 60% of women are diagnosed in the advanced stages. As a consequence, a majority of them succumb to the disease within a year of the diagnosis. With 1 lakh deaths per annum, tragically, a woman loses her life to breast cancer every eight minutes in India. For every two women diagnosed with breast cancer, one dies from it!