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Surgeon Perspectives on the Approach to Breast Surgical Oncology in Northern Province, Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Analysis (SPABSO)

G Naganathan¹, C Rajasooriyar², S Gobishankar^{2,3}, M Ganeshalingam⁴, M Saseetharan⁵, A Dare^{1,6}, A Covelli^{1,7}

¹*University of Toronto, Canada*

²*Teaching Hospital, Jaffna, Sri Lanka*

³*University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka*

⁴*University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada*

⁵*Ontario Tech University, Oshawa, Canada*

⁶*St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto, Canada*

⁷*Mount Sinai Hospital, Toronto, Canada*

Introduction: Breast cancer is the leading cancer diagnosis in women in Sri Lanka. Cancer care delivery within the public healthcare system in Northern Province (NP) has important limitations. Most women diagnosed with early breast cancer continue to undergo mastectomy and axillary clearance. Breast reconstructions are rarely performed.

Objective: This qualitative study examined NP surgeons' experiences in providing breast cancer surgical care, identifying key factors in surgeon decision-making.

Methods: Surgeons who provide breast cancer surgical care in NP were recruited using purposive sampling. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted via video conferencing. Transcripts were anonymized and coded using NVivo software and Thematically Analyzed.

Results: Fifteen surgeons were interviewed. Major themes emerged as follows: "resource limitations" included low finances, brain-drain of personnel, and availability of infrastructure like timely imaging and histopathology; "training gaps" included low exposure to breast onco-plastics; "patient factors" included late presentation, Ayurvedic medicine use, financial strain, and low interest in cosmesis; "systemic factors" included the economic crisis and stakeholder buy-in.

Conclusions: While recent research from the region demonstrates an uptrend in breast-conserving surgery (BCS), NP surgeons reported low patient interest in BCS. This study identified important barriers to BCS adoption in Northern Province. Further studies probing patient, stakeholder, and system factors are needed to understand whether BCS can be better adopted in Northern Province, Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Breast cancer, surgical decision-making, mastectomy, breast conserving surgery, Northern Sri Lanka