

Employing blind women to help detect breast cancer

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As of 2005, German gynaecologist Dr Frank Hoffmann was no longer allowed to send women under the age of 50 to get mammograms without first finding a breast abnormality during his routine examination.

Since some breast lumps can be very small, Hoffmann wasn't certain he could discover something during the few minutes he had to spend with each patient. That's when he decided to launch an innovative programme, Discovering Hands, hoping to give blind women an opportunity for a life-changing career by turning their more acute sense of touch into a skilled breast tumour detection tool.

With 17 Medical Tactile Examiners (MTEs) already trained and working across Germany, Hoffmann's initiative has connected with the Ruderman Family Foundation, based in Israel and Boston that prioritises the inclusion of people with disabilities in the Jewish community.

"I don't know many examples of a Jewish and Israeli funder foundation investing in Germany. It's not easy with our history," Jay Ruderman, president of the Ruderman Family Foundation, told JNS.org.

With the support of various German governmental bodies and Hoffmann's 2010 election as fellow by ASHOKA, an organisation that invests with social entrepreneurs, Hoffmann developed an entire curriculum training blind and visually impaired women to become MTEs.

The Ruderman Foundation granted Discovering Hands an initial \$72 000 donation this year to help it grow across Germany, and it will offer logistical support to bring the programme to Israel, where initial discussions have taken

place with the Hadassah University Hospital-Mt Scopus in Jerusalem.

For women under the age of 40, mammograms are not always "very good at detecting tumours, because the breast density is pretty high at that point and a lot of things are hidden," said Dr Virginia Kaklamani, an oncologist at Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Therefore "the idea of having somebody trained to do breast exams, especially if because that individual... is visually impaired, [he or she] has a better sense of touch, I would think that would work."

In the MTE breast examination method, self-adhesive orientation stripes with tactile orientation points are attached to the patient's breast in various positions, and the breast is divided into zones that allow the examiners to define the precise square centimetre where an abnormality is found. Unlike an exam by a doctor, an MTE breast examination takes between 30 to 60 minutes.

Discovering Hands conducted a study in conjunction with the University of Essen, looking at 451 patients that were examined by MTEs. Among these patients, there were 32 abnormal findings that were discovered by the MTEs, but not by the doctors. "Women with those findings would have been sent home by the doctors," Hoffmann told JNS.org. A new peer review study will begin next month.

"The results [of the Discovering Hands study] are very encouraging," Kaklamani said, cautioning that more studies were needed to test the programme's full effectiveness.

Hoffmann believes that that his programme has potential beyond breast cancer detection. "A well-trained sense of touch is useful in other diagnostic situations... MTEs one day (could ex-



amine) the eye bulb, the prostate, the testicles" or lymph nodes, he said.

According to Kaklamani, breast cancer is notably prevalent in the Ashkenazi Jewish community because individuals of that ancestry can carry BRCA gene mutations.

"In the general population, one in 500 individuals are positive in the Ashkenazi Jewish population it's one in 40."

Given its focus on the inclusion of people with disabilities, what sparked the Ruderman Family Foundation's interest in Discovering Hands is less the science behind breast cancer detection and more the programme's potential to employ visually impaired women.

"I think [Discovering Hands] has a huge medical benefit for the community, but it also has a huge benefit for providing employment and

inclusion for blind women," Jay Ruderman said.

"Losing your sight means that you retract yourself from public life, lose contact with your friends, lose your job. Many of them are reduced to the four walls of their own home," Hoffmann said. "Taking part in aspects of other lives... connects them intensively with patients. On the other hand, doing their job, they are real life savers."

According to Kim Charlson, director of the Perkins Braille & Talking Book Library at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts (pictured), one challenge blind people discover when searching for employment is "the attitude of people who are sighted about the abilities of people who are blind".

"The women in this programme are absolutely going to have that extra skillset because they know how to interpret what they are detecting with their fingers, whether it's Braille or if they're looking for a tumour," said Charlson, who is blind herself.

"It's a great opportunity to work where blind people can make a significant contribution in some way, and have a job, and pay taxes, and do all those things like everybody else does."

Charlson, who is also a breast cancer survivor, is acutely aware of the challenges surrounding its diagnosis and treatment.

For the Ruderman Family Foundation, the next step is to try to bring Discovering Hands to Israel by next year, Jay Ruderman said. If the foundation could bring the programme to a hospital and make it a success, the project might get some public attention and induce demand, and then the Israeli government might respond with funding and other assistance.

"That's what I'm hoping will happen in Israel," Ruderman said. (JNS.org)

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