

## Cheaper breast cancer tests for NHF beneficiaries

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BREAST cancer patients registered with the National Health Fund (NHF) will now have their Breast Cancer Receptor Studies done at a reduced cost at the University Hospital of the West Indies Pathology Laboratory.

A diagnostic test that would normally cost \$10,000, through the latest benefit that has been added to the NHF's Individual Benefits list, will now be subsidised by \$4,800 per test. The UHWI Pathology Laboratory is the only lab that provides the service locally.



Minister of Health Dr Fenton Ferguson (left) in discussion with National Health Fund Chairman Sterling Soares at the launch of the Fund's Breast Cancer Receptor Studies Benefit at Knutsford Court Hotel in Kingston, yesterday. (PHOTO: BRYAN CUMMINGS)



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Speaking yesterday at the benefit's launch at the Knutsford Court Hotel in Kingston, Minister of Health Dr Fenton Ferguson said the move by NHF marks a milestone in efforts to improve the health of Jamaicans, while managing and trying to prevent the development of cancer.

"This is important because cancer has a major impact on the health and well-being of the population in Jamaica and this does not only apply to the person who

is directly affected, but it impacts on family, it impacts on children, it impacts on community, it impacts on (the) workplace..." Dr Ferguson said.

Approximately 300 Breast Cancer Receptor Studies are done yearly, the health minister noted. Of this total, 60 to 70 per cent are taken from public hospitals, he added.

Chairman of the NHF Sterling Soares said this initiative will cost the Fund an estimated \$1.5 million per year.

"The Breast Cancer Receptor Studies Test... is essential for the accurate diagnosis and effective treatment of breast cancer. However, if persons diagnosed with breast cancer are unable to afford the test, then the fight against breast cancer becomes much more difficult for them," Soares shared.

Breast cancer cells are tested to determine receptor status, whether they are hormone receptors or biological receptors, the result of which is important in making treatment decisions.

The NHF chairman also said the proposal, which was brought to the attention of the NHF Medical Review Committee by the pathology laboratory, "gained support based on the impact it would have on the lives of mostly public patients and because NHF was able to afford the introduction of this new benefit, the estimated cost of which is \$1.5 million".

Meanwhile, Chief Executive Officer of NHF Everton Anderson urged clinicians to encourage patients to enrol with the NHF.

"I want to use this opportunity to encourage the surgeons who make the initial diagnosis of breast cancer to ensure that patients are immediately enrolled with the NHF for this condition, so that these patients will be able to access this new benefit," the Fund CEO said yesterday.

Breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer-related deaths in Jamaican women over the age of 25. Anderson said the condition has been on the NHF Individual Benefits list for pharmaceutical care since 2003.

Anderson also said that a total of 5,605 people are enrolled with the NHF for breast cancer, six per cent of which are men. The NHF has paid for just under 50,000 claims totalling more than \$322 million in subsidies for breast cancer medication.