

Becoming the First Female Chair of Radiology: Dr. Bakhru's Journey to the Breast Imaging Profession, Mammography During COVID, and the Importance of Support Systems

Connecticut Breast Imaging

00:04 - 00:38

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Hello and welcome to Breast Assured the podcast about Breast Health. I am Dr. Madhavi Raghu, Director of Breast imaging at Connecticut Breast Imaging in Danbury, Connecticut. We're so glad you can join us. Today we will be joined by our very own Dr. Seema Bakhru to learn a little bit more about her background and why she decided to become a breast imager. Dr. Bakhru, is also the Chair of Radiology at Danbury, Norwalk and New Milford Hospitals. Hope you enjoy the conversation. Welcome, Dr. Bakhru!

00:38 - 00:40

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Thank you so Madhavi. It's such a pleasure to be here.

00:41 - 00:54

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

I'm so excited that you're here, as well. So, you know, we're doing a series on getting to know all our different breast imagers. And I just wanted to, you know, really start with your journey. How did you choose radiology?

00:55 - 01:17

Dr. Seema Bakhru

So, you know, it was interesting because radiology was probably the last specialty for me. I thought, who would want to sit in the dark all day long in a little tight reading room and just read cases all day long, that just really didn't seem appealing to me when I was in medical school at all. So, I was actually planning on going into internal medicine and likely gastroenterology was what my interest was.

01:18 - 01:57

Dr. Seema Bakhru

But then I actually couldn't get into a sub-internship on my fourth year of medical school until August. So, I had July to kind of play around with and I thought, what can I do that will make me shine during rounds in August? And I thought radiology was a perfect pick because I thought I would be the imaging girl on the team rounds. And so, I would be able to, you know, that was my way to stand out, basically. So, I ended up doing a radiology elective in July of my fourth year of med school and I loved it. It was so interesting, you know, I think we have the perspective of seeing almost every single patient that comes through because almost everyone has some form of imaging.

01:57 - 01:58

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Correct.

01:58 - 02:47

Dr. Seema Bakhru

And you get to see so many different pathologies, so many different disease processes. And I have to give credit to my mentor, Petra Lewis, who ran the program there. She did an amazing, phenomenal job with a lot of input, with a lot of teaching, and I came out of that rotation thinking, wow, actually

radiology is pretty cool and interesting. But I was still hung up, you know, I still thought I wanted to do internal medicine. So then September came along, I did my sub-I, I asked all the medicine residents that I was meeting, you know, I'm so torn, I don't know what to do. Should I do radiology, should I do medicine. And every single one told me to do radiology, even though their chosen field was internal medicine. So that basically made the decision for me. And I'm really glad that I went into it. I've never regretted that I'm a radiologist.

02:47 - 03:16

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

You know, it's so interesting because just talking to some of our other colleagues, many report the same type of experience where radiology was just never part of the medical school curriculum. And that's true. You know, and I think most of us just sort of stumbled upon it because we just happened to see it. Right. You know, we don't have enough women that go into radiology for sure. But it's almost like, luck, in terms of how people really just fall into radiology.

03:16 - 03:18

Dr. Seema Bakhru

It is. It is. It's like destiny.

03:18 - 03:40

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

It really is. And then, of course, many of us ended up choosing breast imaging as a subspecialty, which is really different from other aspects of radiology. Right, right, right. We're now patient facing – exactly. So how did you decide upon breast imaging and, you know, were there any specific experiences that led you to that decision?

03:40 - 04:16

Dr. Seema Bakhru

It was really the patient aspect of it because, you know, like I mentioned before, the thought of just sitting in a dark cave of a room and just reading off of a computer all day long, it really wasn't that appealing to me. I really miss that patient interaction. You know, that's one of the things that I really enjoy as part of medicine. That's why I went into medicine in the first place. And I think when you're just sitting behind a computer, it's so easy to forget that these aren't just pixels and dots on a on an image – this is an actual patient, you know, has certain concerns, who has anxiety about their diagnosis, who's coming to you with a symptom. I think you forget that.

04:16 - 04:44

Dr. Seema Bakhru

And breast imaging was really appealing to me because you get that daily reminder. You know, you're talking to the patients, they're super anxious and you're trying to calm them down. You know, you're doing procedures as well. So, it wasn't just a matter of just reading cases, you're also doing something hands on as well. And then even the follow up, you're giving them the biopsy results. So, I felt like in that way I got that internal medicine component. Yeah. Things that I liked about internal medicine, you know, I thought it was a really good mix.

04:45 - 05:14

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Right no, I totally agree with you. I mean, it really brings a sense of humanity. Yes. To what we do. And just that continuity of care, being able to see the patients year after year. I know we've had some radiologist who have a following. Yeah. And as I'm sure you do as well, you know – patients that like to come see you year after year for your skill set. Was there a moment during your training or anything that just sort of solidified your decision to pursue breast imaging? Did you ever have second thoughts or anything like that?

05:14 - 05:25

Dr. Seema Bakhru

No. I mean I don't think I really had second thoughts. Like I said, I think it was just a really good mix for me, for cases, for, you know, procedures and for patient interaction. And that was really what I was looking for.

05:25 - 05:26

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Right. Right.

05:26 - 05:49

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

I know that for a period of time you actually served as the Assistant Program Director for the residency at Norwalk, again, speaking to your experience – just in terms of your experience as a resident and your decision to pursue breast imaging – what were some things that you tried to implement for those residents so that they could have a good breast imaging experience?

05:49 - 06:30

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Sure. So I think the most key thing is really to have the residents be hands on. So they really should be looking at all the cases, making up their own interpretation and then with the procedures, you know, starting to get comfortable with the procedures. Because for me, I was so terrified the first time I had to do a procedure, my attendings said, Oh, well, you can do the lidocaine. And I thought to myself – I have a million thoughts going through my head – What if I don't give enough? What if the patient is in pain? What if I don't do it properly? And so such a simple thing was just terrifying for me, right? As a medical student, as a resident. So I think just kind of easing their fear is getting them practice.

06:30 - 06:56

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Well, you know, one of the things that Dr. Boroumand did, she's our core faculty for breast at Norwalk, she brought in chicken breasts for the residents so that they could practice doing that, practice holding the biopsy device, practice using the lidocaine. So I think that was really useful just to get a familiarity with it, because if you don't know what you're getting into, then how do you know if you're going to like it or not? So you really need to have that hands on experience.

06:56 - 07:05

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Right, I mean, that's actually good life advice, you know? I mean, you just don't know what you're going to choose until you're, you know, actually in the middle or in the thick of that.

07:06 - 07:20

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

And certainly, I think as the Program Director or the Assistant Program Director, it really probably called upon some of your some of your leadership skills, you know, and you probably did a lot of learning during that time period. So what was your experience like?

07:20 - 07:59

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Sure, I mean, I think the best experience is when residents come up to you and say, we had a great rotation or they say they want to go into breast because of the rotation that we've put together. That's really heartening and that means that you're doing the right thing. The whole point of being an attending to residents is really to spark their excitement, their interest, and really, you know, guide them in their career paths as well. And it's so nice to meet even residents who say they're going into a different specialty; they say they want to continue doing breast as well because they enjoyed it so much and they really feel like the educational component is amazing on the breast rotation.

08:00 - 08:22

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Breast imaging, breast cancer screening, it's really for the masses for any woman over 40 and it really it lends itself into population health, it lends itself in to, you know, health care disparities. Right, so I think it's really critical for residents to have familiarity and understanding of the bread and butter aspects of breast imaging.

08:23 - 08:38

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Yes. Yes, absolutely. And, you know, again, because we see these patients, we talk to these patients, sometimes they speak a different language. So getting used to communicating with them through an interpreter, these are all life skills that they need to develop. And I think the breast section really does a good job of that.

08:39 - 08:43

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Correct. And I think those are important skills just as a physician, even as a human being to have.

08:44 - 09:02

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

So let me ask you a little bit about now that we're talking about screenings, your thoughts of screenings during COVID. I know that the volumes dropped. I don't think they're quite back to the pre-pandemic levels, but just in terms of speaking to patients about their concerns, in terms of seeking screening, what are some of your thoughts?

09:02 - 09:45

Dr. Seema Bakhru

I myself am guilty of this during COVID. I think we basically shut down everything and kind of closeted ourselves into our home. I even took my daughter out of school for a whole year, and I think we all had those fears about COVID. But the truth is, is that we have a very safe environment. You know, we are taking additional cleaning protocols, disinfecting protocols. We're all still wearing masks. It's actually very safe for you to get your mammogram in terms of you actually catching COVID. I don't know of any cases, honestly, that have come through that they've actually caught COVID from having their mammogram or ultrasound. We do try to move patients through as quickly as we can so that you're not waiting around and you're not unnecessarily exposed.

09:46 - 09:58

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Well, actually, that's a that's a really good point, because in Connecticut, breast imaging patients are coming in with the comprehensive script. Right, so that allows us to move from screening to biopsy. So, I mean, do you want to explain a little bit about what the comprehensive script is.

09:58 - 10:41

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Sure, so the comprehensive script is something that your physician can order for you. And it basically starts with a screening mammogram and it provides basically an order from your ordering physician for us to do whatever else is necessary for your diagnosis. So, for example, if there's an abnormality on your mammogram, typically we need to go back to your provider to ask for a separate prescription for a diagnostic mammogram or ultrasound. If you already have the comprehensive script in place, that order is already included within your initial script. So if we see an abnormality immediately on your mammogram and you're still there. We can actually do your diagnostic imaging immediately after that, typically.

10:41 - 11:06

Dr. Seema Bakhru

So that really saves you an extra trip and saves you quite a bit of additional time. After that, if you need a biopsy that's also included within that comprehensive script. So again, we don't need to keep on going back to your doctor and asking for another prescription. We can just carry you through forward and really expedite your care so that you don't have to make three separate trips to our center. We can just potentially even do all of it in one trip.

11:06 - 11:17

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

I agree. I mean, it's really great for patients and I think it's going to be great for our referring doctors. As well for patients who have fears related to COVID, I think this this should really help with that as well.

11:17 - 11:19

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Correct. Correct. Yes. Because you don't have to keep coming back.

11:19 - 11:27

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Right. Exactly. And to the extent that we can, we offer, you know, same day reads so that patients don't have to come back again and again for additional imaging.

11:28 - 11:39

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Yes. And I think that's nice for the for the patients, too. You know, they have an immediate answer. They don't have to wait to get a letter in the mail or wait for their, you know, referring provider to call them back with the results. This way they know.

11:40 - 11:44

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Right. I agree with that. I agree with that. And we try to make that happen as much as possible.

11:44 - 11:54

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

What about vaccines? Everybody now is at a different stage in terms of where they are in the whole vaccination process. Do you think that should prevent someone from getting a mammogram?

11:54 - 12:49

Dr. Seema Bakhru

No absolutely not. You know, particularly if you're someone who actually has a symptom, if you are feeling a lump or you have some nipple discharge, you know, please do not wait to get your mammogram just because you just got your COVID vaccine. If you're a regular, you know, you're just coming in for your screening mammogram, just know that sometimes the vaccine can cause some enlargement of your lymph nodes in your armpit region. But just make a note. The technologies will ask you at the time of the exam, you know, when was your last COVID vaccination? What arm was it in? For the most part, we can usually clear that if you tell us that you just had a COVID vaccine a week ago on your left and we see some enlarged lymph nodes on your left, we usually just let that pass by. It's pretty rare that we're calling you back for that because this is a known side effect of the vaccine. Just make sure that you make a note of when you had your last COVID vaccination and which side you had it on.

12:50 - 13:20

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

I agree. And I think you make an excellent point, which is if you have something symptomatic like a lump or nipple discharge, it doesn't matter where you are with your vaccination process. You have to come in and, you know, be seen by your doctor and definitely be referred for imaging so that we can sort that out. Yes, absolutely. I think one of the things that we're we've seen and observed is that although we're not seeing as many cancers as we did pre-pandemic, the cancers that we are seeing are at a more advanced stage because of this.

13:20 - 13:53

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Right and like you said, you know, I think a lot of women put off their screenings because of the pandemic and, you know, fears of going in for what may be an unnecessary exam. You know, I would just encourage all women to come in and just have your mammogram done, have all your regular not just mammograms, but anything, you know, whether it's just seeing your general practitioner again or, you know, going for that colonoscopy you've been putting off – yes that colonoscopy – you know, it's important to take care of your health because if we can catch it early, the cure rates are amazing.

13:53 - 14:01

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Absolutely. I mean, especially for breast cancer, you know, localized early-stage breast cancer, the five-year survival rate is basically close to 100%.

14:01 - 14:02

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Exactly, exactly.

14:02 - 14:03

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

So that's where we want to be.

14:03 - 14:13

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Right. And early detection is really the key. And early detection really happens with your screening modalities, with mammograms, with ultrasounds. And that's why we really encourage you to come in.

14:13 - 14:33

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

So switching gears, I want to actually highlight some of your recent career accomplishments. So Dr. Bakhru, is now our newest Chair of Radiology for Danbury, Norwalk and New Milford Hospitals. And it's a great accomplishment. So, first of all, congratulations.

14:33 - 14:42

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Thank you. Thank you Madhavi. It's a tremendous honor and the group chose me and I really thank the group that they have the confidence in me to do this.

14:42 - 15:06

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Well, I think you're the right person for the job. You clearly have the skill set and the temperament, but you're also the first woman Chair of Radiology in the area. So I think it's that's a tremendous honor for the group, not just perhaps for you, but, you know, it's a real honor to be able to have someone like you in that position.

15:07 - 15:37

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Tremendous honor, tremendous responsibility. And, you know, I look to my fellow radiologists to help guide me. I'm really looking forward to making some improvements to the practice and really bringing us together as a team. I think, again, with COVID, because we were so siloed in our own little separate worlds, we weren't doing department meetings together, we weren't really doing any of those social events that we used to do together. I think we've become a little bit disconnected. And, you know, one of my goals is really going to be to bring us all together to be one cohesive team.

15:37 - 16:02

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Right. And I think that team approach is not only relevant in just your job as the leader or as a Chair, but also just in all of breast imaging as well. I mean, it's really the team that starts from the schedulers all the way to the patients, to the doctors. But as a Chair, I really appreciate the fact that you consider yourself as a member of the team, because that's truly the future of leadership.

16:02 - 16:32

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Yes. No, I mean, we're all members of the team. And I think sometimes people think, oh, well, it's only the doctor who's doing this or something. But really, every single member of the team, like you said, from schedulers to technologists to the secretaries who are taking in your information, we're all part of a chain. And if any part of that chain breaks down, that affects everything else downstream. So it's really important that we're all cohesive as a team and that each link within the chain is as strong as possible.

16:32 - 16:33

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

I completely agree.

16:33 - 16:44

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Well, I think that it's fantastic that you're here in this role and you're here to shepherd the group. So on a personal level. Tell us a little bit about your personal life. I know you have a couple of children.

16:44 - 16:52

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Yeah. So I have two daughters. One is six and the other is three. So they definitely keep me busy outside of the office.

16:53 - 17:11

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

That's great. But I think that, you know, you serve as a great role model for so many people in the group and even our residents. I mean, it's no longer a woman who's balancing work and life. Right. It's all of us men, women who are balancing just life in general. And how do you do it? You have so much on your plate.

17:12 - 17:28

Dr. Seema Bakhru

I think you have to have a good support system. I think that's really key. My husband also has a very busy job as well that's very demanding. My nanny is amazing. I will say, you know, that is definitely key. And you need to have someone who's reliable.

17:28 - 17:28

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Right.

17:28 - 18:00

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Who you know, can you can depend on. My parents are actually moving from Massachusetts to my neighborhood. So they are going to be living down the street from me, which I think is huge. And I'm so grateful that they're willing to do that for me. That means that I can be at work and I can focus on my work. I'm not worrying about who's taking care of my kids. Yeah, who is taking care of the house, you know, what's going on. It's an amazing, tremendous point for me that I know that I have people that I can depend on to take care of my kids.

18:00 - 18:02

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Well, I mean, I think you really do need a village.

18:02 - 18:03

Dr. Seema Bakhru

You do, you do. Absolutely.

18:03 - 18:05

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Sounds like you have a town.

18:06 - 18:18

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Yes! Well, you know, that was always our goal. Actually, our goal was always to take over a block with our family, basically. So have, you know, our siblings and our parents all live on that one block, a little cul-de-sac of our own.

18:18 - 18:40

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

For sure. For sure. But I also think, you know, you're serving as a great role model for your own children. I mean, for them to see that it's great to be able to do what you do and it's okay to get the

help that you need to do your job well. I think there was always a pressure in the past for one person to be a singular, heroic figure in the family. Gone are those days.

18:40 - 18:54

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Yes! No, definitely. And, you know, my six-year-old comes up to me and she says, well, I want to be a doctor and I want to be an artist and I want to be a scientist and I want to be a singer. And I say, good, great, you can do it. You can do all of it.

18:54 - 18:56

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

And you should tell her that you're going to move in with her.

18:56 - 19:00

Dr. Seema Bakhru

When my time comes, I'll retire and support her.

19:01 - 19:15

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

But that's so important to have that mentality that we're going to support each other. It's actually fantastic. Well, I just want to thank you Seema for joining us today. I mean, it's just so tremendous that you are part of our practice and you do such great work and take such good care of patients.

19:15 - 19:19

Dr. Seema Bakhru

Thank you so much Madhavi. And I have to say, it's a pleasure working with you as well.

19:19 - 19:42

Dr. Madhavi Raghu

Okay. Thank you. Thank you all so much for listening. If you enjoyed this podcast, please like and subscribe wherever you listen to your podcasts. Also share it with a friend. But most importantly, if you or your loved ones haven't had a screening mammogram, we urge you to get one today. See you all next time.