

Teaching Lecture

E14. Supporting breast cancer patients in different cultures: EUROPA DONNA houses

S. Kyriakides*

Europa Donna, Prodromos Street 28, 1424 Nicosia, Cyprus

The life experience of the diagnosis of breast cancer is similar for women across boundaries, races and religions. The questions that go through the mind, the confusion felt, the uncertainties and fears are common to most women and their families.

In the past, cancer was seen as an infectious disease and patients were treated in special hospitals. This has changed, and gradually the stigma surrounding the disease of breast cancer gave way to an understanding of the science of the disease. It also gradually became obvious that this was more than just a somatic disease but had more far-reaching implications for the woman and her family.

However, in many countries and cultures, the stigma surrounding a breast cancer diagnosis still prevails and frequently dominates the perceptions of the local society. Women and their families find it difficult to speak out about their disease, and there is considerable anxiety in the field of their employment, as they are concerned, often justifiably, at being discriminated against. This is why advocating for this cause was from the beginning a challenge at many different levels in my home country of Cyprus, a journey full of as many twists and turns, highs and lows, as the experience of breast cancer itself for the patient. To show an example of this at the level of a National Advocacy Group, the presentation of EUROPA DONNA Cyprus will follow, describing how the breast cancer advocacy movement has led to changes in the care of women, how the silence has been gradually broken. I have been sharing the development of this in Cyprus through the building up of the network of Europa Donna Houses.

Setting up the Forum of EUROPA DONNA, Cyprus, was the first step in the beginning of this journey, to break the silence and bring together the whole of society to unite in a cause. The Forum, as all Fora of EUROPA DONNA, has as its key mission to ensure optimal treatment for breast cancer for every woman in

Europe. The adoption of the ten ED pan-European goals is only the beginning as one then has to put them into an order that allows their implementation according to the cultural and scientific needs of the country.

Despite a very satisfactory level of medical care in Cyprus in 1998, there was little else available for women and their families. The amount of information – especially written information – directed towards their needs following a diagnosis of breast cancer was limited, women did not have sufficient access to psychosocial support, they were not given prostheses after surgery, nor were they open about their experience. Most importantly, the term advocacy was unknown, the right to become a voice for themselves and other women was not a priority, and they were not aware of the need to be educated in the science of their disease, to be correctly informed, or to be aware of the availability of clinical trials, of treatment choices, of correct information.

With all the above in mind, and with the ten ED goals lighting the way, the first ED Cyprus House was opened in Nicosia in 2006. Choosing to call this a House and not an office was exactly the embodiment of what we wanted to share symbolically with the community: that we were not just opening an office, but a space arranged in a specific way, welcoming women and their families, providing information, education, and also resources: a meeting place, a nest for women that would contain them not only physically but also emotionally.

Today, the network of EUROPA DONNA CYPRUS numbers three houses, in the main towns of the island, hosting a wide range of activities, and having become established as a hub of information and education.

Conflict of interest statement

I have no financial or personal relationships with organizations or individuals that could inappropriately bias my work.