

## **Press Release**

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Speech by the President of Malta Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca at the Hilda Schembri Memorial Lecture entitled: 'Who cares for the Carer', organised by Europa Donna Malta, 2016

Honourable Dr Claudette Buttigieg Your Excellency Distinguished guests Dear friends

It is my pleasure to deliver these opening remarks at this year's Hilda Schembri Memorial Lecture, facilitated by Europa Donna Malta.

Let me begin this brief contribution by commending Europa Donna Malta that forms part of a pan-European Breast Cancer Coalition, for its sterling work since its inception in 1987, in raising awareness, supporting women in their fight against Breast Cancer, and for being a catalyst for positive change in the sector.

Europa Donna Malta is also a valued member of the National Cancer Platform, which brings together entities working in the field of cancer, to collaborate together in order to ensure a holistic, coordinated and sustainable service for all cancer patients and their loved ones.

Hilda Schembri was a co-founder of the Breast Care Support Group.

This annual lecture is held in memory of this remarkable lady, who fought for the dignity of breast cancer patients and survivors across the Maltese Islands.

I am grateful that, this evening, we shall have a further opportunity to listen to the voices of carers and survivors.

Through the work of the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation, I have come into direct contact with the experiences and the courage of such individuals, living with cancer.

Each and every one of us must continue to commit ourselves to take practical measures to support them and their families.

My remarks will focus on an important practical initiative, which Europa Donna Malta, in collaboration with the General Workers Union, has highlighted recently.

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This initiative is the urgent need to discuss medical leave for cancer patients.

People with cancer and other chronic diseases are at high risk of being dismissed from employment, due to using up their sick leave and vacation leave because of sickness.

This same fate could affect the care givers.

There is, therefore, a growing need for a review of provisions for sick leave in this regard.

We must encourage the development of policies which permit people with serious medical concerns, to be granted compassionate leave.

This should apply also to their primary care givers.

This important issue needs in-depth analysis and discussion by all relevant stakeholders.

Examples of such policies and/or legislation already exist in other European countries, such as the United Kingdom.

On the other hand, I note with satisfaction that public sector employees have taken the initiative, a number of years ago, to support colleagues experiencing sickness, by donating a number of days from their vacation leave.

I must also mention that some private companies have also taken the initiative to support their sick employees to lessen the burden.

Let me take the opportunity to encourage more employees and companies to follow these generous examples.

In the meantime, Europe Donna Malta and the General Workers Union have worked together to identify sources of good practice which could inform national policy.

We also need to think of what can be done for an employee if, due to sickness, becomes disabled, and hence, would no longer fit in his or her original place of work.

We need to be courageous and innovative to develop new ways, and take initiatives to show tangibly, compassion in other areas that, until now, have been unexplored.

In this way, we send a powerful message about the value we place in the wellbeing of the individual and their family.

Surely we cannot stand by while individuals living with cancer are and feel, disadvantage.

We cannot allow them to suffer in silence in a workplace, which is not conducive to their needs.

However, I would like to emphasize, the positive and compassionate attitude of many employers towards their employees living with cancer.

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When analysing and discussing reasonable adjustments for someone with cancer, we must consider, among other issues:

- creating the time for them to attend medical appointments;
- the need for greater flexibility around working hours;
- offering the option to work from home;
- allowing extra breaks to help people cope with fatigue;
- adjusting performance targets to take into account the effects of their condition;
- and allowing a phased return to work after extended sick leave.

Most importantly of all, we must listen to the real needs of all individuals who are living with their illnesses.

We must take on board their experiences and strengthen the voices of civil society contributors, like Europa Donna Malta, to call for, where needed, substantive changes in legislation, policy, and practice.

The wellbeing of all members of our society must be our first priority.

We must strive to ensure that each individual is recognised in the fullness of their dignity, and can live a meaningful and fulfilling life both in and out of the workplace.

I am sure that this evening's Hilda Schembri lecture will be another constructive experience.

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