
*Opening Speech at the World Cancer Day Conference 2018, delivered by H.E.
Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta*

2nd February 2018

[Salutations]

It is my pleasure to welcome you all to the Grandmaster's Palace in Valletta, for the opening of this important conference, tackling the impact of cancer on children.

Our distinguished speakers come from Italy, the United Kingdom, and Malta, in order to shed some much-needed light on this topic, while also promoting awareness and solidarity with those who are affected.

Let me begin by congratulating the National Cancer Platform Association, and its collaborators, for organising this conference ahead of World Cancer Day, which we shall be commemorating on the 4th of February.

When I facilitated the setting up of the National Cancer Platform Association, it was to bring together all non-governmental organisations, which are working in the cancer sector in Malta.

The primary aim of the National Cancer Platform Association was, and still is, to provide a safe space for sharing expertise and building collaboration; to further our knowledge in this area; and to provide collective recommendations, to the authorities and the sector in general.

In this context, the Association has already made great strides, by offering its constructive contributions to the National Cancer Plan of Malta for 2017 to 2021.

Today's conference is further evidence of the Association's continuing commitment, to provide access to information and to create opportunities for awareness.

The conference shall tackle two equally essential topics, namely, the effects of cancer on children, and also the effects experienced by children, whose parents are living with cancer.

In Malta, this second topic is well served by the efforts of the Karl Vella Foundation, which aims to support children from families that are affected by chronic and severe illnesses.

Let me take the opportunity to also mention another important development, that took place in Malta last year, with the launch of the Emmanuele Cancer Research Foundation.

This essential research institution will be providing much-needed research, development, and education about cancer, for the benefit of individuals, communities, and societies, across the Maltese Islands, and also the Mediterranean Region.

The Center represents an essential collaboration between the President's Trust, the University of Malta, and the Fondazione Terzo Pilastro. This collaboration gives me great confidence for the future, to address the many challenges that cancer poses in our society.

From my own experiences working with Malta's national charity, the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation, I have met with increasing numbers of individuals and families who require access to such education and urgent treatments, in order to address their cancer concerns. These have included a number of children.

This conference is, therefore, not only providing a context from which we can explore necessary responses to such cases, but also promoting research, which will hopefully help us, to combat cancer and its risks.

There are studies related to the social habits of the Maltese, conducted by the World Cancer Research Fund, which unfortunately suggest that higher levels of obesity, and lower levels of physical activity all represent troubling risk factors for developing certain cancers, within our population.

Children are not exempt from such risks, although the kinds of cancers that affect children, both in Malta but also in a European and global context, are of particular types.

While cancer is relatively rare in childhood, it does contribute considerably to childhood mortality, and can have negative effects which surface later in a survivor's life.

The disease comes in multiple subtypes, and represents both a life-threatening condition, and a major public health issue.

According to data presented by the World Health Organisation, childhood cancers represent between 0.5% and 4.6% of all cancers.

The pattern of cancer in childhood differs considerably from those among people of all other ages. In general, in Malta as well as in other parts of the world, leukaemia constitutes about a third of all cancer in childhood. The other most common malignancies are lymphomas and tumours of the central nervous system.

While most childhood cancer initially presents itself with non-specific signs and symptoms, children in high-income countries, who are usually under the close watch of their parents and medical authorities, are more likely to have cancer detected early.

In low-resourced countries, however, there are various barriers to early detection. These include poor access to health services and inadequate diagnostic facilities.

In high-income countries, approximately 80% of children with cancer survive five years or more after the diagnosis of cancer. These improving outcomes result in a growing population of long-term survivors, who need follow-up treatment and care.

The prognosis is much lower for children diagnosed with cancer in low- and middle-income countries.

Within the European Union, for example, there are particularly worrying indicators from Eurostat, which suggest that survival rate inequalities are a major challenge for Europe, with worse outcomes experienced in Eastern European countries.

Factors explaining this include the late diagnosis of cancer, which leads to lower levels of effective treatment; poorly equipped hospitals; other diseases, from which children might suffer; and a lack of knowledge about cancer among primary health care providers.

This information comes to us from the European Reference Network on Paediatric Cancer, which aims to help national health systems to further cooperate and collaborate, in the best interests of all patients.

The network currently unites 57 institutions from 18 European countries, and I believe that it is an essential resource in order to continue reducing inequalities in childhood cancer survival, by providing high-quality, accessible, and cost-effective healthcare across European borders, for all children and young people with cancer, regardless of where they live.

There is still a long way to go, for us to overcome inequalities and ensure safer and better treatment across the European Union. The need to improve access to standard care across Europe, and to increase cure rates for all paediatric cancer types, should be a top priority.

As the EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety has said, and I quote;

“No country alone has the knowledge and capacity to treat all rare and complex conditions.”

We must therefore continue cooperating, to share life-saving knowledge at a European level, and beyond.

I am confident that the Emmanuele Cancer Research Foundation, and its collaborators, will be able to make its own contributions to these efforts, by disseminating essential data from Malta and the Mediterranean region, to other institutions and authorities in Europe, and across our respective regions.

Moreover, 2018 commemorates European Society for Paediatric Oncology’s 20th Anniversary. This occasion is an opportunity for us all to celebrate the achievements within the paediatric oncology sector, in Europe, over the last 20 years.

Over the past decades, there have also been sources for hope. These are made clear by Dr Greg Armstrong, of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in the USA, who has said, and I quote;

“Treating childhood cancer is one of the miracles of modern medicine. Fifty years ago less than 30 percent of children would survive childhood cancer but now we know that over 80 percent will.”

In order to keep building upon these improvements, it is essential for us to make effective investments in research and, moreover, to create innovative opportunities for education and awareness.

Let me therefore conclude by encouraging our national and European authorities, and civil society activists, to endorse the global Gold Ribbon campaign for paediatric cancer.

In this way we shall be raising much-needed visibility in this area, by showing our support for the fight against childhood cancer.

We must do all that we can to inspire one another, and to sow seeds of hope in the lives of children and young people with cancer; in the lives of the survivors of childhood cancer; and amongst their families.

Children and families who are living with cancer are heroes within our communities, as are the volunteers in our NGOs, the staff members, and the medical professionals who passionately support and dedicate their careers to supporting the childhood cancer community.

It is only by working together, by listening to one another, and by taking practical actions, in synergy with each other, that we can effectively respond to the complex and multifaceted demands of childhood cancer treatment, care, and research.

Let us continue to do all that we can, to promote the holistic wellbeing of our families and our communities, especially amongst the most vulnerable members of our society.

Thank you for your attention, and I look forward to exploring the outcomes of this conference.