

Opening Address delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the Hilda Schembri Memorial Lecture, with the theme: “What About Me? Breast Cancer and How it Affects Our Loved Ones”

15 October 2018

Ms Sharon Cassar Naudi

Renowned speakers

Dear friends

I am always touched to be with you and to share a few thoughts at the opening of the Hilda Schembri Memorial Lecture.

Let me begin by commending Ms. Sharon Cassar Naudi, President of Europa Donna Malta, and the entire team, for keeping alive the memory of Hilda Schembri.

I take this opportunity, to honour the memory of Hilda Schembri, a founding member of the Breast Care Support Group, the predecessor of Europa Donna Malta. Hilda was an inspiring activist, who fought for the dignity of breast cancer patients and survivors, across the Maltese Islands.

Hilda is gone, but never forgotten. Her legacy lives on through all of you.

You are all doing such crucial work by providing the much-needed support for women living with breast cancer, and their loved ones, and by raising awareness of prevention, care and treatment.

This is particularly essential at a time when the incidence of breast cancer in Malta is among the very highest in Europe.

Cancer affects not only for the person who receives the diagnosis, but their loved ones and all those close to them.

I appreciate the fact that this year's memorial lecture will highlight the experiences of families and friends. Unfortunately, families and friends are often forgotten, even though they play such an essential role, in being of a pillar of strength for their loved ones.

As we all know, a diagnosis of cancer has a significant impact on family members and friends. Some people say that their family and friends find it difficult to talk with the patient, or they do not understand the changes that take place due to the illness and treatment.

It is difficult to see a loved one going through cancer. Even such a difficult time, may present positive outcomes:

- a moment for reconciliation;
- words left unspoken, finally said; and
- the possibility to focus on what is truly most important in life.

Cancer creates many questions in the minds of family members and friends, who are learning how to provide care to their loved one.

Many people ask themselves such questions as:

Why my loved one?

Will my loved one recover?

What should I say to them?

How can I be an effective source of support?

Each person faces the crisis in a unique way, and for this reason, I believe it is essential that our communities are further educated, about how to effectively communicate, when dealing with this sensitive situation.

I believe family members and friends should seek the support of psycho-social professionals in such difficult times, rather than struggling in silence.

I am confident that the speakers this evening, all an authority in the field, will give us more information about this approach during their intervention.

I truly believe that affirming the emotional, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing of people living with cancer, and their families and friends, is an essential strategy to achieve holistic healing.

The more openly and honestly we can discuss difficult and challenging issues, including our own fears and anxieties, the more likely it is that family and friends can cope and react in positive and helpful ways.

Supportive family and friends make all the difference, to empower people living with cancer during their journey.

On concluding, we must never forget that cancer is not stronger than hope.

Cancer is not stronger than love, or friendship, or courage.

Cancer cannot destroy our inner peace or conquer our spirit.

I augur that the work being done by Europa Donna Malta will continue in order to share this message of hope, to all people living with cancer and their loved ones.