

Opening Speech, delivered by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta, at the Annual Oncology Conference organized by the Sir Anthony Mamo Oncology Centre within Mater Dei Hospital, with the theme “Cancer Journey: Embracing the Care”, 23 November 2018

Distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

It is my pleasure to join you, to inaugurate this third annual edition of the oncology conference.

Let me begin by commending the commitment of the entire professional team of the Sir Anthony Mamo Oncology Centre.

I must thank you, for your sterling efforts. Many patients and their loved ones speak so highly of your excellent care and support, which they receive throughout their treatment.

I am pleased to note that this conference is evidence of the synergies that exist amongst stakeholders in the cancer sector, and which are needed so much, to continue to enhance the standard of care that we need to give to cancer patients.

I am confident that working in synergy will keep Malta on the right track, in providing the most effective oncology care.

This conference is also an ideal opportunity, to enhance awareness about cancer care in the Maltese Islands.

I can also affirm, after previous experiences, that this conference is providing an environment where we can address the specific concerns which diverse patient groups, service providers, and researchers face.

Therefore, let me take this opportunity to share some of my thoughts about this crucial area of work, and the changes I have seen in the sector of cancer care, since I became involved in the Malta Community Chest Fund Foundation.

During these years, I have noted a tangible increase in the incidence of cancer in the Maltese Islands.

I have come into close contact with the first-hand experiences of many individuals and their families, who are going through cancer.

All of them require treatment and care, but also access to information and support, from the point of diagnosis and throughout their journey.

I must also take the opportunity to commend the numerous non-governmental organisations, who give their support to patients and their families, during this most vulnerable and sensitive time in their lives.

These NGOs do invaluable work, with much passion and commitment.

This was one of the reasons why I decided to facilitate the setting up of a National Cancer Platform in 2015.

The National Cancer Platform includes representatives from all the organisations and groups, across Malta, working in this sector.

I would like to continue to encourage our civil society activists and organisations in the sector, to work alongside our professionals, to ensure the ongoing successful implementation of the National Cancer Plan of Malta for 2017 to 2021.

On the other hand, I would like to encourage our authorities to involve further, our cancer NGOs in policy decisions.

Collaborations and partnerships in the sector, is the only way forward, to promote healthier and more effective trans-disciplinary approaches in the rapidly evolving sector of cancer research, treatment, and care.

The establishment of the Emanuele Cancer Research Foundation is also a contribution to Malta's national commitment in this regard.

This Foundation will be providing innovative opportunities for cancer research, not only for the benefit of the people of our Maltese islands, but also for our Euro-Mediterranean Region, and beyond.

Let me, therefore, commend Professor Christian Scerri, who will be delivering a keynote speech at today's conference, and whose valuable contributions as a board member of the Emanuele Cancer Research Foundation and a scientist, are a credit to our country.

By creating national and international synergies, through initiatives like the National Cancer Platform and the Emanuele Cancer Research Foundation, we will have the necessary holistic picture, to keep achieving genuine, effective, efficient, and top-quality cancer care in this country.

I believe that this is what the heart of your conference, which has been so inspiringly entitled "Embracing the Care", is all about.

This process of effectively "embracing the care" is a two-way approach, which takes place among service providers, patients, and their families.

During my many visits to hospitals and oncology centres in Malta and abroad, I have seen that a most critical factor to provide strong cancer services is the focus that such institutions place, on the way that their patients feel.

As we all know, the experiences of a patient are shaped by everything and everyone, as part of the entire continuum of care.

I believe that every interaction that a cancer patient has, whether with a nurse, social worker, doctor, or therapist, is an intrinsic part of the caring process.

This empowered environment of care is crucial, and an intrinsic part of embracing a focus on holistic support, as a cornerstone of our cancer treatment strategies.

We are all aware that cancer is the second leading cause of mortality worldwide. Newly predicted rates from Cancer Research UK are truly staggering, which state that 1 in 2 persons will be affected by cancer in their lifetimes, which means half of every population.

I am convinced that, in this context, your efforts to ensure that patients are partners in their own journey towards health and wellbeing, are crucial.

A dignified caring environment is just as important as the drugs, surgery, and the treatment procedures which patients receive during their stay in hospital, to create long-term care.

Eurostat indicators estimate that around 700,000 men and more than 540,000 women die each year of cancer in the EU.

Moreover, according to data from the World Health Organisation, the mortality trends for certain kinds of cancer are fortunately declining in the Maltese Islands, while unfortunately, there has been a concurrent increase in some others.

I am informed that Professor Scerri will go into more detail about ongoing developments in the Maltese context.

As we all know, the rise in the incidence of cancer is the result of a combination of factors, including lifestyle choices, the environment, and the increasing life expectancy of people in Malta.

Additional socio-economic challenges being faced in this sector are the growing demand for cancer care services; the consequent rise in cancer care costs; and the innovations of expensive and continually developing medicines and treatments.

To address such concerns, we need a multi-disciplinary approach, which includes the participation of academics, professionals, private sector stakeholders, and civil society, working together to take practical action.

For this reason, I am pleased to see the emphasis that this conference is placing on teamwork, as a vital prerequisite for our national cancer care providers to effectively respond to the complex demands of cancer research and support.

We need to advocate for further developments in research, to develop new treatments and care, and also access to medicine, to one and all.

I believe that caring for cancer patients is the responsibility of our entire society, and that service providers should also expect to receive the care that they need, while working hard on behalf of others.

On concluding, let me share with you the inspiring words of Martin Luther King, Jr, who said:

“If you can’t fly, then run. If you can’t run, then walk. If you can’t walk, then crawl, but by all means, keep moving.”

In the fight against cancer, we must keep moving against all odds.

We must keep moving forward with dedication, with perseverance, and with hope.

I augur you a fruitful conference, and I thank you for your attention.