

EU needs to address the needs of women with advanced breast cancer

Written by Emma McClarkin on 4 February 2015 in Opinion

An art installation in the European parliament hopes to challenge attitudes to advanced breast cancer, writes Emma McClarkin.



Europe has made great progress in the fight against breast cancer with the adoption of the European parliament resolutions in 2003 and 2006, which called for the member states to implement breast cancer services in line with the European guidelines for quality assurance in breast cancer screening and diagnosis. However, we still need to ensure nation-wide mammographic screening is introduced and the establishment of multidisciplinary specialist breast units, available to all women. In particular, women with metastatic or advanced breast cancer need to have equal access to these specialist breast units, to ensure that their ongoing need for care and psychosocial support is coordinated and sustained. The psychosocial needs of women with advanced forms of breast cancer are not always met. While a cure for advanced breast cancer still needs to be developed, current treatments and management strategies can allow for a prolonged life expectancy and an improved quality of life.

Women with advanced breast cancer were the focus of an innovative and powerful artwork, which I hosted in the European parliament last week, with the support of Novartis Oncology. The display was previously on show in nine countries (Belgium, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Dubai). Entitled 'I am not the cancer', this sound and video installation by award-winning artists John Wynne and Tim Wainwright aim to challenge public attitudes to the advanced form of breast cancer. Tootje Boutkan, a woman with advanced breast cancer joined us for the opening of the exhibition and was interviewed as part of the artwork said, "I have cancer, but I am not the cancer. I am Tootje. Sometimes I hear the quote 'the invisible women' and sometimes that's the way I'm feeling. I do a lot, I'm an active woman but I'm also a bit invisible with my illness."

Tim Wainwright, who leads the visual aspect of the artwork explained to me that while there are wide variations in the cultural, linguistic and economic backgrounds of the participants, he was really struck by the variety of ways in which the responses of the women to the illness transformed over time, particularly by how they adapted to changes in their family life and what they felt their place in society to be. He said, "It's a great privilege to be able to make such intimate work with women who have been forced to confront their mortality but who remain so completely alive."

John Wynne, who partnered Tim in producing the sound for the installation, added, "We created this installation to enable individuals to tell their stories - people whose experiences might otherwise have been overlooked and whose voices might not have been heard. Each woman's contribution is unique and compelling."

The art installation is a reminder to us all that each day is precious and valuable for these women. I hope that by showing this thought-provoking, experiential work we can make the advanced breast cancer patient group visible and unite women and the breast cancer community in the fight against the disease. I also hope that the European parliament will help ensure that the right policy measures are put in place to support these women and their families.

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About the author

Emma McClarkin is a member of parliament's ECR group