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The first Breast Health Day stressed the importance of lifestyle factors in maintaining breast health

15 October 2008 – Milan, Italy

EUROPA DONNA (ED) – The European Breast Cancer Coalition launched the first Breast Health Day on 15 October at a media event that attracted journalists from eight European countries. The purpose of the event was to help to ensure that women and girls across Europe are aware of the lifestyle factors that can influence their future breast health. Invited speakers included Philippe Brunet, Head of Cabinet to the EU Commissioner for Health, Prof. Carlo La Vecchia, advisor to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), Dr. Alberto Costa, Director of the European School of Oncology and Prof. Umberto Veronesi, Scientific Director of the European Institute of Oncology and Senator in the Italian Parliament. Also present were 32 National Representatives and Delegates from EUROPA DONNA's 41 member countries.



*Susan Knox,
EUROPA DONNA Executive Director*

In their opening addresses, Ingrid Kössler, ED President, and Susan Knox, ED Executive Director, emphasised the importance of Breast Health Day in ensuring that women understand the role of lifestyle factors – nutrition, physical activity and

maintaining a healthy weight – in helping to reduce the risk of breast cancer.

“With members in 41 countries and the increasing amount of new information and studies showing that lifestyle factors play a big role in breast cancer incidence, it is our obligation as a European Coalition to raise awareness, disseminate information, to get the word out to women, mothers, families educating and raising young women in our society, about the importance of a healthy lifestyle to avoid breast cancer later in life,” Ms Knox said. She added that it is for this reason that EUROPA

DONNA has dedicated a special day, 15 October, to breast health. With the growing cancer burden across Europe and worldwide, and the increasing cost to health systems, she said, it is necessary for people to understand the steps they can take to reduce their risk of breast cancer.

“Some risk factors cannot or will not change, but those over which we have an influence are important to know and to do something about. Many are things that we did not know when we were younger, such as the importance of exercise, maintaining a healthy body weight, limiting weight gain and alcohol intake. Now that we do know, we need to do something about it,” she said. She also emphasised that early detection and optimal treatment of breast cancer, particularly through population-based mammography screening and specialist breast units as stipulated in the *European Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Breast Cancer Screening and Diagnosis*, have been shown not only to improve survival but also to allow women to live cancer-free lives.

The *EUROPA DONNA Guide to Breast Health*, a booklet containing information on lifestyle factors, prevention, screening, advocacy and other topics, was also officially released at the conference. Those present were also later able to view the Coalition's 30-second public service announcement directing women to consult the ED website (www.europadonna.org) for accurate information on breast cancer, particularly concerning the *European Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Breast Cancer Screening and Diagnosis*.

The announcement started airing in local languages across ED's 41 member countries in October and will be aired for the remainder of the year and into 2009.



Ingrid Kössler, EUROPA DONNA President



The Breast Health Day panel: S. Knox, C. La Vecchia, P. Brunet and A. Costa.

Importance of Breast Health Day and EU guideline implementation



Representing the European Commissioner for Health, Philippe Brunet emphasised the Commission's dedication to promoting prevention and early diagnosis of breast cancer, since, he noted, studies suggest that up to one-third of cancers in Europe could be prevented through appropriate lifestyle choices. He said that awareness is one of the key factors for future success in controlling breast cancer, the most common cancer in women across Europe.

"It is more crucial than ever that we work more efficiently together towards the objective of decreasing the ever increasing

human and social burden of this disease," he said. Prevention should be a priority since it is the most effective long-term strategy to reduce the burden of cancer, he added.

The EU has two main priorities in this area, he said: 1) to encourage information exchange in order to help develop and promote the most up-to-date and effective interventions, and 2) to support Member States' efforts toward cancer prevention implementation measures at all levels.

There is clear evidence of the link between lifestyle factors and breast cancer, he said. He added that studies support that a healthy diet, adequate

physical activity and maintaining a healthy weight could help to reduce the risk of developing breast cancer. Through its EU Health Programme, he said, the Commission is addressing key factors influencing health, including physical activity and nutrition.

Mr Brunet called for improved communication strategies between citizens, to encourage and educate them about healthy lifestyle choices. "Because in cancer, as in many other important diseases, every person can play a pivotal role in shaping his or her own health through the daily choices made," he said.

He added, however, that primary prevention alone is not enough. Effective screening programmes are required to enable prompt diagnosis and early treatment of breast cancer. He said that regular and systematic examinations can potentially lead to a significant reduction in mortality and improve the quality of life of those living with cancer, by detecting the disease at a very early stage when it will be more responsive to less aggressive treatments. He said that the EU Health Strategy of 2007 aims to take action in cancer screening, given the ageing population and the growing number of people expected to be affected by cancer in the future.

Mr Brunet cited the many EU and European documents and initiatives that aim to promote prevention and early diagnosis of cancer: the European Code Against Cancer and the 4th edition of the *European Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Breast Cancer Screening and Diagnosis* (on which ED has produced a *Short Guide*). Published by the European Commission, the fourth edition of the guidelines, he said, is now considered a

benchmark for best practice in cancer screening in Europe and beyond. The 2003 Council Recommendation on Cancer Screening invites all EU Member States to implement population-based screening programmes for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer. The first report on the implementation of the Council Recommendations, released in June 2008, states that despite substantial progress in screening in recent years, the ultimate objective of conducting 30 million breast examinations per year in the EU has not yet been reached.

Mr Brunet emphasised that population-based mammography screening is only justified when it is offered in conjunction with high-quality breast cancer care, such as that provided in multidisciplinary breast units. Mr Brunet added that based on studies and consultations with experts, the Commission advocates comprehensive cancer centres and supports a multidisciplinary approach to provide the most effective and personalized care for patients. Recommendations for establishing specialist breast units are included in the EU guidelines, he added.

Cancer research is a EU priority, he said. From 2002–2006, 485 million euros were allocated to European cancer research through the 6th Framework programme. He added that a similar amount is now available within the 7th Framework programme adopted in 2007.

There are and will continue to be large disparities in cancer cases and care between different socioeconomic groups, within countries and between EU Member States, he said. "This is why more than ever we need to reaffirm our clear commitment to fighting cancer at all possible levels, including international organisations, NGOs and civil society," he added.

In 2009 the Commission is to set up a new EU Platform for Action on Cancer to provide the framework for identifying, sharing and spreading information about cancer prevention and screening.

"Breast Health Day serves to keep this issue in the public eye, but maybe more importantly, at a higher level of priority in decision makers' minds," he said. He ended by reinforcing the European Commission's support of EUROPA DONNA: "I would like to reiterate the full support of [EU Commissioner for Health] Mrs Vassiliou and of the Commission for all EUROPA DONNA efforts and future achievements."

Prevention: lifestyle factors and their impact on breast cancer



Presenting data on lifestyle factors and breast cancer prevention provided by IARC Director Prof. Peter Boyle, Prof. Carlo La Vecchia stated that since breast cancer incidence is on the rise in most countries around the world (some due to better detection and diagnosis), effective prevention strategies are required.

Breast cancer remains the leading neoplasm with regard to both incidence and mortality among women worldwide, he added. In the year 2021 there could be more than 5 million new cases of breast cancer in the world, he said.

According to the most recent available figures, almost 430,000



Mr Philippe Brunet, Head of Cabinet to the EU Commissioner for Health



Prof. Carlo La Vecchia, advisor to the IARC and Ellen Verschuur, ED Vice-President

women were diagnosed with breast cancer and almost 132,000 died from this disease in Europe in 2006. He added that the mortality figure is now in the area of 135,000. However, he stated, deaths from breast cancer have started to decline due primarily to a mix of better prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

Prof. La Vecchia added that the reduction in breast cancer mortality has been noted despite the increasing prevalence of risk factors for the disease, such as rising age at first pregnancy, alcohol consumption, and overweight and obesity.

Primary prevention through modifying the lifestyle factors that are associated with cancer risk may help to reduce this disease burden. Prof. La Vecchia said that sufficient evidence supports that avoiding weight gain in adult life can reduce the risk of post-menopausal breast cancer. He added that for post-menopausal women with breast cancer, losing weight could reduce the risk of recurrence. Regular physical activity furthermore reduces the risk of breast cancer in the order of 20%, he said, and seems to be independent of body weight. There is also sufficient evidence to support that alcohol consumption increases breast cancer risk, he added.

Prof. La Vecchia cited the results of a study conducted in France in 2000 that calculated the percentage of breast cancer cases that could be attributed to identified risk factors. Almost 11% of breast cancers could be attributed to use of combined hormone replacement therapy (HRT) or oral contraceptives and about 10% to physical inactivity. Almost 10% were due to alcohol consumption, over 5% to reproductive factors, and almost 5% to obesity and overweight.

He concluded that women should therefore be advised to undertake some brisk physical activity every day and to avoid obesity and overweight, and they should be aware that long-term use of combined HRT is a significant contributor to breast cancer risk. He added that women should reduce their consumption of alcohol since each daily additional unit of alcohol consumed increases the risk of breast cancer by about 7%.

Synergy between advocates, professionals and educators: working together for breast health



Dr. Alberto Costa emphasised that synergy between all those involved in breast cancer, from the surgeons to the clinicians, to the researchers, the patients and advocates, is mandatory because the disease cannot be treated by one person alone. “Without the synergy, without the advocates, the professionals, the educators it is impossible to win this battle,” he said.



Dr. Alberto Costa, ESO Director

Such co-operation led to the creation of EUROPA DONNA, he added. When Prof. Umberto Veronesi, the Coalition’s founder, saw that women in the United States managed to have a proportion of the defence budget diverted toward breast cancer research, he suggested that they could do the same in Eu-

rope. A first meeting was held and it was realised that to make a difference, co-operation was needed between professionals, women and patients.

Dr. Costa stated that effective synergy between researchers, clinicians, surgeons and advocates in Europe is demonstrated by the European breast cancer conferences, from IM-PAKT (Improving Care and Knowledge through Translational Research), the St. Gallen conferences, EBCC (European Breast Cancer Conference) and the EUROPA DONNA Pan-European Conference.

Vision for the future of breast health



In his presentation, Prof. Umberto Veronesi, a pioneer of breast-conserving surgery, said that the goal of “zero mortality” due to breast cancer will one day be reached. He stated that the revolution in the identification of a breast cancer gene mutation has helped to identify women at risk of breast cancer, and the revolution in imaging techniques has improved breast cancer detection.

Beyond the fundamental effects of lifestyle, he said that chemoprevention as primary prevention of breast cancer has also been shown to be effective. In addition, imaging techniques – from mammography, to ultrasound to MRI – now help to detect breast cancer in its earliest stages.

“If we could reach the objective and identify small tumours that are not palpable, we could reach the vision of very close to zero mortality,” he said. In 1950, 10-year survival was about 20%, and today it is almost 90%. He added the important observation that survival is directly proportional to the size of the tumour. For every millimeter increase in tumour diameter, he said, there is a 1% reduced chance of survival at 10 years.

Prof. Veronesi presented the results of his recently published study in which over a 15-year follow-up period 5,408 women underwent annual physical examination, mammography and ultrasound. At the end of the study period 47 of the women had died from cancer, but only four died from breast cancer. A total of 136 breast cancers were identified in their very early stages and treated appropriately. He added that in the new Zero Mortality Project a further 50,000 women will be followed annually with thorough examinations and effective treatment for breast cancer if required.

“We are improving, studying and making progress in detection. Prevention through lifestyle approaches is important and the potential of the detection techniques now available must be exploited,” he said.

Present at the press conference were journalists from Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK, as well as a number of representatives of the Italian press.

Leading up to Breast Health Day news releases were widely sent to MEPs, individuals and sponsors. A number of organisations helped by distributing the news release to their members or posting news on their website.



Prof. Umberto Veronesi, EIO Scientific Director

Breast Health Day
is to be held
every year on 15 October

www.breasthealthday.org

EUROPA DONNA has launched a new website dedicated to breast health, including information on healthy living, mammography screening, breast health advocacy activities in Europe, and much more.



EUROPA DONNA Guide to Breast Health released

EUROPA DONNA's newly published *Guide to Breast Health* was officially released in October. It aims to provide information concerning breast health for women and girls of all ages, based on results of large studies. It also includes information on mammography screening, advocacy, clinical trials and more.



The EUROPA DONNA Head Office has moved

Please note EUROPA DONNA's
new address and contact numbers:



EUROPA DONNA
The European Breast Cancer Coalition
Piazza Amendola, 3
20149 Milan
Tel: +39 02 3659 2280
Fax: +39 02 3659 2284
Email: info@europadonna.org
www.europadonna.org
(Member of Cancerworld)

Breast Health Day Key Messages

- Living a healthy, active lifestyle, avoiding weight gain and obesity can help maintain healthy breasts. Studies show that about one-third of breast cancer cases can be attributed to increased weight and physical inactivity.
- Growing evidence supports that there is a protective association between physical activity and breast cancer, preferably over a lifetime, but probably beneficial even if begun after menopause.
- Women should limit their weight gain in adult life and maintain a body mass index (BMI) of 18.5–24.9. They should also try to limit their amount of abdominal fat. In women who have had breast cancer, maintaining a healthy weight may reduce the chances of recurrence.
- Engaging in moderate exercise for at least 30–60 minutes every day may help maintain breast health.
- Eating a well-balanced diet (with fat intake not exceeding 30%), including fresh fruit and vegetables in your daily food choices and limiting intake of red meat, has numerous health benefits.
- Limiting alcohol intake to one glass of wine or beer a day (10 grams of alcohol or less per day) can help keep breasts healthy.
- Having children at a younger age, having several and breast-feeding them also protects against breast cancer.
- Seriously considering the pros and cons of taking hormone replacement therapy and discussing them with your physician can influence future health.
- Mammography is widely accepted as the best method to detect breast cancer early.
- Participating in population-based mammography screening programmes can help detect potential problems early. Studies show that women who attend screening have a greater chance of surviving a breast cancer diagnosis.