

The War Cry

Nancy Brinker, World Health Organization Goodwill Ambassador for Cancer Control, spoke with the IAEA's Louise Potterton about the Agency's role in tackling the cancer crisis in developing countries.

It started with a promise to a dying sister and became the global leader of the breast cancer movement. The "Susan G. Komen for the Cure" charity was founded in 1982 by Nancy Brinker, the younger sister of Susan who lost her battle against breast cancer at the age of 36.

Inspired by Susan's concern to help other women suffering with the disease, Nancy promised her sister she would do everything in her power to fight breast cancer, which is on the increase worldwide.

What would you say are the main priorities at the moment to tackle this crisis in developing countries?

The main issue is awareness. There are developing countries that don't mention the word cancer. We have a UN that within its Millennium Development Goals has cancer mentioned nowhere. It consumes more lives today than AIDS, TB and malaria all added up and it's galloping in size. It's a giant human tsunami that's already happening. By the year 2030, it will be completely out of control. And yet 40% of cancers deaths are preventable.

Do we need to see more of a global movement as far as

cancer is concerned? We see this with HIV/AIDS, we see this with malaria but not with cancer.

We definitely do. We need a cancer global fund and we at Susan G. Komen are leading the way in terms of what we believe has to be done. But there is no question that governments must make a huge commitment. Governments, associations, organisations like the IAEA, everyone has a piece of this. So it wouldn't

be just one fund but rather a combination of NGOs, government funding, private sources and a concentrated effort of political will.

What would you say is now the main role of the IAEA in tackling this cancer crisis?

The main role is to help combat the growing cancer epidemic, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where the needs are greatest. Globally, as many as 100 million people could die of cancer in the next 10 years.

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In fact, the IAEA devotes over \$15 million and its expertise each year to help developing countries improve their capacity to fight cancer. It is vital work and I fully support their mission. There are huge bodies of research and real clinical care that rely on the expertise developed by the IAEA. We have to be able to make sure we support it, promote it, fund

Susan G. Komen for the Cure — the US-based breast cancer foundation — was launched in 1982 by Nancy Brinker in honour of her sister, Susan, who died of the disease in 1980. Since then Ms Brinker has worked tirelessly to help improve the survival chances of other women with breast cancer. The charity has evolved into the world's largest grassroots network of breast cancer survivors and activists. Thanks to events such as its signature awareness- and fund-raiser, the Komen Race for the Cure, a 5 km run that takes place in more than 200 cities, the foundation has invested nearly US\$ 1.5 billion in fighting breast cancer.

For more information visit www.komen.org



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— Nancy Brinker, WHO Goodwill Ambassador

it and make it part of a cancer control programme.

A breast cancer diagnosis does not necessarily mean a death sentence in countries where the facilities are available. But this is not the case in many parts of the developing world. How can this be addressed?

By changing the culture of awareness and making it appropriate for people to be screened in clinics and embrace early detection and prevention.

It's extremely important to have programmes for screening and diagnosing this disease early. So many of the cancers that are diagnosed in Africa and in different parts of the world where there are low resources are detected at very late stages. So a person does not have a hope of living through it.

Our work isn't rocket science. It's about understanding and applying what we know. And this work isn't sexy, it's not glamorous, it's not the kind of science that gets people on fire. What it does do though is reach into the hearts and minds of people. Now we have to reach into the pockets of huge governments, of government agencies, of people, to make the commitment and have the political will to make all of the treatment, screening, and diagnosis that we have in developed countries available in one form or another in low resource countries.

You were recently appointed as a Goodwill Ambassador for cancer for the World Health Organization (WHO). Can you tell me about this position?

This is a position that has never been designated or filled before. But I think it's a nod by the WHO to the enormity and the size of the cancer problem. I've been very blessed in my life to be busy and to have led the largest breast cancer organisation in the world.

I wasn't exactly looking for something else to do but this is a very important 'something-else-to-do' because this is a message to not just foreign governments but to the UN, to the major governmental and NGO communities in the world. It's a call for action. If I can do nothing else, it will be to raise awareness and challenge people to finally make the commitment to address cancer in their countries, in their communities and in their villages.

Your campaigning has got a personal side to it. Your sister died of breast cancer. Can you tell me how your sister inspired you to do what you do?

She not only inspired me, she made me promise her that I would do this. When someone asks you when they're dying to realise something that gives their life meaning, there's no question about it. Of course I promised that I would do it. I didn't know that it would take the rest

of my life — but it has and I'm sure it will. Yet the journey has been so amazing. It is fraught with challenges and hills and valleys every day. But I'm very encouraged versus thirty years ago.

How do you think your sister would feel today if she were here now? Would she be proud of what you've achieved?

I think she would very much like the activities, the outcomes and the work that we have developed through Susan G. Komen. The organisation looks like her — outreaching, loving, concerning, very personal in nature. I think, like me, she would want to make sure that everyone in the world had access to care and an opportunity to not be victimised by this disease.

The sad reality is that there is still tremendous work to be done. We don't know what causes breast cancer and we don't know how to prevent it. Women are still dying unnecessarily in our own backyards.

And on the global front, the situation is worse. Ten million women around the world could die from breast cancer in the next 25 years. ☸

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