Before the Breast Care Support Group was set up in 1989, there was virtually no support for women with breast cancer. A Mastectomy Support Group had been started two years earlier, and it was decided to open this up to all women who had been affected by breast cancer. Laura Bajada was the first Chairperson, Eileen Cachia the first Treasurer and Hilda Schembri the Secretary, while Helen Muscat was elected Advisor. Recognising the different needs of different categories of members, both a Young Women’s section and a Metastatic Breast Cancer support group have been set up in the last few years. Members of the committee keep themselves updated on the latest developments in breast health by attending seminars and training courses abroad, mostly sponsored by the organisers. This helps the Group to move forward with its work to raise awareness about breast cancer in Malta and Gozo. The Group’s aims are to help women and their families to overcome the trauma of breast cancer and to offer support by listening and being there for anyone who needs our help. We give talks at clubs, schools and workplaces, where we hand out books and other relevant material to raise awareness about breast cancer.

Presidents: 1989 - 1993 Laura Bajada; 1993 - 1996 Hilda Schembri; 1996 - 2002 Helen Muscat; 2002 - 2008 Jackie Vassallo; current president Gertrude Abela has held the position since 2008 and is also on the executive board of Europa Donna, the European Breast Cancer Coalition. Hilda and the other founder members will never be forgotten because the idea of this group was theirs and we have to thank them and their families for being so courageous to speak out in public about their illness.

Some milestones in the Group’s history:
1989: A leaflet was designed and translated into the Maltese language and printed with the help of a local sponsor. The Group continues to design and print booklets and other material to provide breast care information and to raise awareness.

February 1993: A Mass was organised at St. Agatha’s church in Rabat. St. Agatha is the patron saint of breast cancer patients and this Mass continues to be celebrated every year.

1995: Various meetings were held with government bodies to promote the role of the Breast Care Nurse, and the Group kept insisting that women with breast cancer needed the trained professional help that these specialist nurses could offer Maltese patients.

1996: Members of the group were given permission to visit breast cancer patients in hospital. These visits continued until the Breast Care Nurses were appointed.

March 1996: The Group held its first seminar, The New Approach to Breast Cancer Care, which was a huge success. In recent years seminars for health professionals have also been held in both Malta and Sicily in collaboration with SOS Donna, a Sicilian group with similar aims.

1998: The first of many breast awareness courses for healthcare professionals was organised, and meetings started to be held also in Gozo. The Gozitan branch of the support group is still very active and meets every 2nd Tuesday of each month, while the Malta group meets every 1st Thursday of the month.

1998: The first Hilda Schembri Memorial Lecture was held. It has become an important annual event for the group.

1999: The first breast awareness walk was held in Sliema. These awareness walks continue to be organised and are always very well attended. In the same year, it was agreed that breast awareness month should be recognized in Malta and the support group started to make pink ribbons to distribute during one week in October tying in with the Hilda Schembri Memorial Lecture. The public at the time was very wary and many refused to take a pink bow. Most people did not want to know about breast cancer. Thankfully this attitude has changed for the better as more people are becoming breast aware, and pink ribbons are now distributed throughout October and, in recent years, also on selected Air Malta flights.

Inside this Issue

Milestones cont. 2
Metastatic Breast Cancer Malta 2
Maltese Breast Cancer Advocates in Milan 2,3
Gallery from our Past Events 3
10 Myths about Breast Cancer Survivorship 4,5
2003: One of two nurses who attended a seminar on Breast Care Nursing in London was sponsored by the Group. The number of breast care nurses at the Breast Clinic at Mater Dei Hospital continues to rise to reflect the ever increasing number of breast cancer patients and the Group continues to sponsor their training where possible.

2004: The Breast Care Support Group was affiliated with Europa Donna, the European Breast Cancer Coalition which has members in 46 states across Europe. The name of the group has now been changed to Europa Donna Malta (Breast Care Support Group) to reflect this important step in its history.

2008: Europa Donna designated 15th October as Breast Health Day, to disseminate information about breast health and to raise awareness of prevention and early detection of breast cancer among women and girls across Europe. As the Malta forum of Europa Donna, the Group holds different activities every year to commemorate this day. Activities have included an event to launch a Breast Health Diary, a whole day of sports and activities in St George’s Square, Valletta and solidarity and awareness walks.

2011: The first “Look Good, Feel Good” fashion show was held. A mix of professional models and breast cancer survivors strutted their stuff on the catwalk. This has also become an annual event, showing women that they can still look good even after breast surgery.

2012: Thanks to significant fundraising efforts, the Group was able to set up an educational fund, offering bursaries of up to €1000 twice a year for health professionals to attend course or conferences abroad.

2013: The Group obtained their own premises, in St. Anne’s Street in Floriana. This has made meetings much easier and a Drop-in Clinic is planned, where anyone who has any concerns about breast health can come and speak to someone.

---

Metastatic Breast Cancer Malta

Metastatic Breast Cancer Malta was set up recently to support persons with MBC. The need for this group was felt as the needs for this group of people are different from those with primary breast cancer. The group offers support and information by printing leaflets and offering one to one support to patients with MBC. The group is a subgroup of Europa Donna Malta. The cofounders are Doris Fenech and Evelyn Vella Brincat.

**Email:** mbcmalta@outlook.com  
**Facebook:** Metastatic Breast Cancer Malta  
**Contact Number:** 99 994 666

---

MALTESE BREAST CANCER ADVOCATES IN MILAN

Maltese advocates Danika Attard and Mary Rose Zammit joined other advocates of EUROPA DONNA – The European Breast Cancer Coalition in Milan in the fight against breast cancer. Both Maltese advocates are members of Europa Donna Malta (Breast Care Support Group) and are involved in supporting women with breast cancer. Danika Attard is a Radiographer at the Breast Screening unit, a postgraduate researcher at the Cancer Care Research Centre in Scotland and is reading for a PhD in Health at the University of Stirling, focusing on cancer care and breast cancer screening. Mary Rose Zammit is a member of Europa Donna Malta and has also supported the fight for breast cancer in Gozo for the last 15 years.

One in eight women is diagnosed with breast cancer at some point in her lifetime, and many of us know someone – a mother, sister or friend - who has had it. This poses a detrimental health problem, representing a continuous threat to women’s health and well-being. The overall mission of the European Breast Cancer Coalition is to raise awareness of breast cancer and to press for improved breast cancer education, increased funding for research and access to appropriate screening, diagnosis and optimal treatment. Europa Donna is advocating to ensure that all European women gain access to breast screening services in line with the ‘European Guidelines for quality assurance in breast cancer screening and diagnosis’ and that these should be provided by the National Health system of each member country. Women should also have access to treatment which is proven effective for breast cancer treatment.

The belief that breast cancer advocacy can make a difference across Europe was the motivation of these Maltese breast cancer advocates for their presence in Milan. Both Danika and Mary Rose underwent intensive training on breast cancer prevention, early detection, screening, communication skills, ongoing research, lobbying for breast cancer, gaining an understanding of the psychosocial aspects of breast cancer and their role as breast cancer advocates.

These advocates have brought back numerous challenges and targets to fulfil. Given the increase in life expectancy, the cancer burden on society is estimated to increase dramatically as people live longer and care and treatments become more complex and expensive.
Patient advocates are teaming together to address these issues to make these a key priority in their countries by being informed and involved in breast cancer debates. It may be possible to lower the cancer burden in future years through prevention and early detection, appropriate education of the public regarding risk factors, the importance of screening, lifestyle choices concerning nutrition, obesity and physical exercise and the environmental factors that have an impact on breast cancer incidence. A satisfactory solution will only emerge if a team approach is taken, with researchers, medical professionals, politicians, health ministers, health economists, the industry and advocates joining together to seek adequate solutions for patients across Europe on health economic issues while maintaining the patient as the central focus of their efforts.

The Europa Donna advocacy training was extremely valuable and has put our vision into perspective, Danika and Mary Rose agree. “The communications training gave us an opportunity to get to know other European members better and to work together towards a common goal. Pink is not just a colour, it is an attitude, it’s our mission”, Danika said. “Following advocacy training, we are now in contact with other members from European countries through social networking to support each other in reaching our goals”, Mary Rose stated. The target of these dedicated Maltese breast cancer advocates is to continue their work in this advocacy process in their fight against breast cancer which will have a positive impact on Maltese breast cancer patients and ultimately on all Maltese citizens.
Myth: Eating Soy products after having hormone receptor positive breast cancer increases my chance of a recurrence.

Fact: Research on soy has been conflicting over the years. It has the capacity to mimic as well as block oestrogens. Overall, natural dietary soy in the form of soy milk, soybean sprouts, tofu or tempeh appears to be safe and may provide significant health benefits when it replaces animal sources of milk and protein. However, soy in concentrated forms such as pills, powders and supplements has the strongest potential for oestrogenic activity and probably should be avoided by anyone who has been diagnosed with hormonal receptive breast cancer.

Myth: If I tested positive for the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene mutation, I must have a bilateral mastectomy.

Fact: Women with a BRCA mutation do have an increased risk of having a second breast cancer and many do choose to have bilateral mastectomies as a preventive measure. However, having a BRCA mutation does NOT mean that you have to get a mastectomy. Women with a BRCA mutation are still good candidates for breast-conserving therapy and many choose this for their breast cancer treatment. Women with a BRCA mutation and any residual breast tissue need to be followed closely and are advised to have enhanced breast cancer screening.

Myth: My deodorant contributed to my getting breast cancer.

Fact: This is completely false! No evidence has ever been shown to prove this.

Myth: If I had a mastectomy, I cannot have a breast cancer recurrence.

Fact: Undergoing a bilateral mastectomy drastically reduces your chances of breast cancer recurrence since almost all of you breast tissue has been removed. There is very small chance that residual breast tissue or cancer cells could recur on the chest wall. That is why it is important to continue with self-breast exams; see your doctor on a regular basis for examination; and report any breast changes to your doctor.

If you have undergone a lateral (one-sided) mastectomy, you are still at risk of developing breast cancer on the other side. A yearly mammogram of the remaining breast is important to detect any potential breast changes. In general, no form of breast imaging will be recommended after bilateral mastectomy - with or without reconstruction.

Note: Having a mastectomy or bilateral mastectomy does not reduce your risk of developing a cancer recurrence elsewhere in your body.

Myth: Eventually, I will be able to stop mammograms.

Fact: After a breast cancer diagnosis, yearly mammograms are still strongly suggested for the rest of your life unless you have had a bilateral mastectomy.
Myth: I should eat an organic diet to reduce my chances of a recurrence.

Fact: Consuming a balanced diet full of fresh fruits and vegetables is always helpful to improving and maintaining your overall health. Whenever possible, it’s a good idea to eat organic fruits, vegetables and meats to limit your exposure to pesticides and hormones added to meats. However, there is no scientifically proven link between the consumption of non-organic foods and an increased risk of breast cancer.

Myth: I had breast cancer in the past so I should not become pregnant.

Fact: Pregnancy after early-stage breast cancer has not been shown to impact breast cancer recurrence or survival. It is often recommended that you wait for some time after completing all cancer treatment (including endocrine therapies) before trying to get pregnant since your body has been through so much. There is no magic formula of when are best for you and your family.

Myth: Since my menstrual periods have not begun again and I am taking tamoxifen, I cannot get pregnant.

Fact: Even if your periods have not returned or they are irregular, tamoxifen does not protect you from getting pregnant. In fact, tamoxifen was originally developed as a fertility drug. Tamoxifen has the potential to harm the foetus. While taking this drug, you should be very careful not to become pregnant by using a non-hormonal form of birth control everytime you have sexual intercourse.

Myth: I should avoid weightlifting activities if I have lymphedema.

Fact: A 2006 research study found women who engaged in moderate weightlifting activities were no more likely to suffer from lymphoedema when compared to women who did not do any weightlifting activities. Keeping your body strong through regular physical activity (including strength building) is also a great way to reduce your chance of having a breast recurrence.

According to the National Lymphoedema Network, the following things can be done to reduce your chances of developing lymphoedema:
- Keep your arm clean and dry
- Do not cut nail cuticles
- Protect exposed skin with sunscreen and insect repellent
- Use care with razors to avoid nicks and skin irritation
- Minimise blood tests, shots and blood pressure cuffs on the arm where surgery took place. Wear gloves while doing activities that may cause skin injury
- Gradually build up the duration and intensity of any activity or exercise. New evidence suggests that moderate supervised weightlifting may reduce risk of lymphoedema
- Maintain a healthy weight
- If you have been previously diagnosed with lymphoedema, consider wearing a compression sleeve when flying in an airplane and wear loose fitting jewelry and clothing

Myth: Bone pain in my hips and knees mean that my breast cancer has spread.

Fact: Thinking your cancer has spread is a very scary thing for many patients. The reality is that a very common side effect of aromatase inhibitors is bone pain and joint stiffness. This can be gradual over a few years or begin shortly after your start taking this drug. If the bone pain continues, gets worse, or interferes with your quality of life, speak to your oncologist.
The Breast Care Support Group is a non-profit voluntary NGO, working closely with The Health Promotion Department and The Breast Care Nurses at Mater Dei Hospital. We are affiliated with Europa Donna, a European-wide coalition of breast cancer associations. We offer support to women who have had or may be undergoing breast treatment of any kind. The majority of our members are breast cancer survivors and we meet once a month to encourage and help one another. We can offer one-to-one counselling with a professional counsellor for women in need of specialized help and their families. We also work to raise awareness about prevention and the importance of early detection which can save lives. We organize talks and lectures and print information and awareness material. All our services and material are offered free of charge and we depend solely on membership fees, sponsorships and donations to carry on our mission. If you are currently undergoing treatment and would like us to help you, if you are a breast cancer survivor who would like to join the group or if you would simply like to help us help others, please contact us.