
Speech by H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, President of Malta at the Third High-level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases, 26 September 2018

Distinguished speakers,
Dear friends.

Non-communicable diseases affect all of our families, our communities, and our countries.

I will focus my brief intervention on two key areas, which I believe, are of particular concern. These are the challenges posed by cancer, and the need to emphasise the importance of mental health.

One important development that recently took place in Malta, which I would like to highlight, was the launch of the Emmanuele Cancer Research Foundation.

As a collaboration between the President's Trust, the University of Malta, and the Fondazione Terzo Pilastro, the Emmanuele Cancer Research Foundation is providing research, development, and education about cancer, for the benefit of communities across the Mediterranean Region.

The impetus behind the Emmanuele Cancer Research Foundation came about as a reaction to the marked increase in cancer rates, which have been observed in Malta.

Indicators from the World Cancer Research Fund show us that cancer cases in Malta are expected to rise, by a shocking 49 percent by 2030. This situation is reflected globally, with data from the World Health Organisation telling us that 9.0 million people die, each year, as a result of cancer.

In response to this reality, my Office brought together all the civil society organisations working in this sector in Malta, to form the National Cancer Platform Association.

This Association represents the aspirations and concerns of our people, and was directly involved in consultations, which resulted in the National Cancer Plan for 2017-2021, put forward by the government of Malta.

I believe that such synergies, between civil society activists and healthcare authorities, are essential.

It is only by working together, by listening to one another, and by taking practical actions, that we can effectively respond to the complex and multifaceted demands of global cancer support, care, and research.

Cancer affects all of us, regardless of our age, ethnicity, or gender. However, there are certain measures that can, and must, be taken, to highlight the prevention of certain forms of cancer.

This can be practically achieved strengthening our national healthcare systems, and ensuring that effective strategies for detection, screening, and outreach are receiving the appropriate funding, especially for people who are at an elevated risk.

On the other hand, let me also take this opportunity to urge the international community to focus more attention on the topic of mental health.

The challenges posed by mental disorders continues to grow, with significant implications for the socio-economic sectors of all the countries of the world.

For example, depression is a common mental disorder and one of the main causes of disability worldwide. The World Health Organisation tells us that over 300 million people are struggling with depression, with more women being affected than men.

We must therefore encourage greater investment in prevention programmes, through psycho-social support and assistance, including access to timely therapies and effective treatments.

I am sorry to say that the healthcare systems, in many of our countries, have not yet responded in an adequate way to the challenges of mental disorders.

The gap in service provision is even worse in low- and middle-income countries, where between 76 and 85 percent of people, who are living with mental disorders, receive no treatment.

Therefore, it is clear that poverty is a major factor, which makes people all the more vulnerable and marginalised, and at greater risk of being exposed to harmful products, unhealthy lifestyles, and receiving limited access to healthcare services.

Let me therefore encourage our respective authorities to take action, to reach the full implementation of the World Health Organisation's Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020.

This essential Action Plan recognises the fundamental role of mental health, to achieve holistic wellbeing for all of humanity.

On concluding, let me say that non-communicable diseases, such as cancer and issues of mental health, are a major stumbling block. They are preventing our countries from achieving the effective implementation of the United Nations Agenda 2030, and its seventeen Sustainable Development Goals.

If we are serious in our commitment to effectively implement Agenda 2030 in the required timeframe, then we cannot afford to drag our feet.

First and foremost, we must end the basic injustice, which is laid out in the first and most fundamental Sustainable Development Goal; namely, the eradication of poverty.

So long as people are struggling with poverty and precarity, they will be at higher risk of certain preventable forms of cancer and mental health challenges.

I urge the international community, professionals, experts, and activists, present here today, to recognise this fact, and to take the necessary action. Now.

Thank you for your attention.