

IMPACT Journalism Day by Sparknews

Screening for women can save lives

CRUCIAL. Women need to be encouraged to screen early for cancer so as to increase chances of healing.

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“People often think that cancer, and especially cancer that affects women, only impacts the older generation, while younger, active cancer patients are isolated exceptions,” says Ida Karpińska, head of the Kwiat Kobiecości (Flower of Womanhood) society. That was also what she believed, before being diagnosed with cervical cancer. “I was 30 years old and working as a graphic designer at a publisher,” she remembers. “But there were plenty of other young people.” The youngest patient with cervical cancer she knew was only 16 years old.

Ida was able to fully recover from the tumor because it was detected early enough. She regularly went for cervical screening. Unfortunately, the majority of women in Poland skip these prophylactic tests, and when Ida realised this and reflected on her own situation it impacted her greatly.

Late discoveries

The statistics are clear: even though the government will pay for a prophylactic test once every three years, as many as 80 percent

of women don't make use of this opportunity. As result, the cervical cancer is discovered too late, and half of every ten women in whom it is detected every day die, according to the Polish Oncology Association.

The National Cancer Registry states that Poland has one of the highest morbidity rates (an incidence of about 3,000 people per year) and fatality rates in Europe. The number of women dying of cervical cancer in Poland is 70 percent above the European Union average. Furthermore, experts from the World Health Organisation (WHO) believe that almost 100 percent of cases are due to the human papillomavirus (HPV), and this debunks the idea that cervical cancer has a genetic origin.

“People are now more informed about cervical cancer, but 11 years ago when I got it, it was hardly mentioned. Nobody talked about diseases from the waist downwards. At that time the big movement was about women who had mastectomies. My aim is to provide the same level of support for women who are struggling with cancers in the reproductive system,” explains Ida.

This was how Kwiat started in 2006. The organization aims to raise awareness of cervical cancer and to support women who are struggling with the condition. “Kwiat is one positive outcome of my illness”, Ida jokes. Kwiat's main office in Bielany, Warsaw, now has six staff members and two midwives. In addition, it



Women attending one of the conferences. COURTESY PHOTO

has coordinators in 16 branch offices. Over a hundred volunteers also help out.

Public campaign

The number of people involved in the organisation increased dramatically following a new publicity campaign and more women are giving maximum publicity to cancer prevention. “The worst feeling is when we hear that a patient whom we've been helping has lost the battle against cancer. It really gets us down and we regret not having been able to reach out to her earlier before the cancer started to develop,” Ida explains. She adds that with early detection the guarantee of successful treatment is almost 100 percent. When the cancer is caught at an early stage and the surgery is not very invasive, these women even have a chance of having a baby.

Ida's most important campaign for the past 8 years is called “Beauty in health” in which she

4,700
THE NUMBER OF COUPONS IN WOMEN'S MAGAZINES AND ON INTERNET SITES FOR FREE GYNECOLOGICAL SCREENING.

tries to convince women to make time for a thorough gynecological screening check once a year. Part of the campaign involves mobile testing units. This is a brilliant solution because the test itself takes only two minutes, which means that women can drop by and be screened without having to arrange a doctor's appointment. And you don't even have to have health insurance to take a test in the mobile units. “The mobile units screened 308 women in Warsaw this year. One in ten were found to have tumors,” she says.

Kwiat has also issued 4 700 coupons in women's magazines and on internet sites for free gynecological screening. “Our suggestion is to go for cervical screening on their birthdays, as a present to themselves,” Ida explains.

Kwiat has other activities like the St Nicholas' Day campaign when women visit patients in hospital with gynecological cancer. “It's very important to take an interest in patients. Unfortunately, some of the women in the wards get no visitors. We bring them cosmetic items - lotions, creams, tissues. At the end of the day they are still women, and caring for themselves help them feel better.”

The organisation is not just for women with cervical cancer. Women with ovarian cancer can also find help at Kwiat. “We are busy throughout the year, not just during campaigns, and we're always there to support anyone who asks for it. We work not only with doctors but also with psychologists and sexologists. This is how we give women all-round help.”