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ALL CANCER SURVIVORS ARE HEROES – INTERNATIONAL CANCER SURVIVORS DAY 2 JUNE 2015

01 June 2015: According to the United States Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results (SEER) program, the survival rate of patients diagnosed with prostate, malignant melanoma, bowel, female breast, non-Hodgkin lymphoma and leukaemia cancers, has improved about 40% over the last 40 years. There is no doubt that overall cancer survival rates are improving globally due to earlier detection rates and advanced treatment methods.

This is according to Dr Dominique Stott, Executive: Medical Standards and Services at PPS, who says, in light of International Cancer Survivors Day celebrated on the 2nd of June every year, that the most critical element in cancer survival remains early detection.

She notes that the age at diagnosis is also a critical factor as survival rates generally decrease the older the patient is. “Younger individuals typically have better overall health, which means that when an earlier diagnosis is made they usually show a more effective response to treatment. Interestingly bowel, breast and prostate cancers have improved survival rates among the middle aged population but this is due to the cancer being detected during screening processes, which are advised for this age group.”

Dr Stott explains that the most common cancer found among men is prostate cancer which is readily detectable through a simple blood test. “The most common form of cancers found in women are breast and cervix and these are also detectable in the early stages provided the patient undergoes necessary screening tests. When breast cancer is detected at stage one, where it has not spread to surrounding tissue, statistics reveal a 88% five year survival rate, but this reduces to 15% should the cancer be detected at stage four when it has already spread to distant sites in the body.”

Survival from malignant melanoma, especially in the UK, is proven to be very positive with a 10 year survival rate of over 90 %. This is as a result of easy diagnosis and early management of this cancer.

“Regrettably, due to the late onset of symptoms and limited current treatment options available for cancers in the brain, oesophagus, lungs and pancreas, these cancers still have a very poor prognosis.”

Rehabilitation is a central part of cancer recovery, to enable the patient to return to their normal life as far as possible. She states that a multidisciplinary team consisting of family members and various support systems will ensure the best outcome for the survivor. “Family members are urged to watch out for signs of depression and anxiety and report these to the medical team in order to ensure adequate treatment.”

While many doctors prescribe anti-depressants to the patient as a routine, the medication might not be the only solution. Dr Stott explains that the patient could also spend time working through the impact and effects of the disease with a counselling psychologist.

Unfortunately due to the effects of chemotherapy or the cancer itself a cancer survivor can experience long term problems related to physical inactivity due to extreme fatigue, she says. "When a patient has remained bedridden due to the side effects of the treatment, they lose muscle mass and bone density which might delay their return to full physical activity at a later stage. In addition to medical treatment, cancer sufferers are encouraged to discuss partaking in simple physical activity to lessen the impact of loss of muscle and bone mass later in life."

Dr Stott suggests that physiotherapists or biokineticists, as directed by the treating doctor's team, assist with activity to ensure that there are minimal hindrances for the patient's return back to normality as a survivor. "Diet is also a very important aspect for cancer survivors who may suffer from nutrient deficiencies due to nausea caused by rigorous chemotherapy. As a result, it is also advisable for cancer survivors to consult with a dietician to ensure adequate intake of appropriate foods to return to optimal health."

"Lastly, in order to ensure financial security in the unfortunate event of being diagnosed with a dread disease, such as cancer, patients need time to recuperate from the long term effects of treatment. They might not be able to work for a considerable time and income protection insurance during this period would lessen the financial burden. Whilst medical aid will cover medical bills, income is still needed to support the family. Consumers must have proper long term life insurance, medical, disability and dread disease cover in place from an early stage in their life. Once a cancer diagnosis has been made, it will be very difficult and expensive for the patient to obtain this type of insurance," concludes Dr Stott.