

Cancer is Not a Death Sentence!

BY VAZHA TANVERIDZE

Hopeful as this title may seem, there's still one "if" – if the cancer is discovered early. At a glance, this is fair enough: in order to avoid the worst possible outcome of this ailment, it needs to be detected as fast as possible, which necessitates regular health check-ups. Even if we think ourselves healthy, we still need to go to the doctor and undergo screening – a worldwide method of early cancer detection which plays a crucial role in its prevention. Screening isn't new to Georgia, but as with many other things, our country's reality and consciousness are able to find a great deal of arguments against making use of it.

The State program for breast, cervical, colon and prostate cancer was implemented in 2008 and is

free for the age groups it is aimed at.

Since the program began, the early pathology detection rate has tripled. This does not mean that the percentage of cancer patients has grown – on the contrary, the increased availability of screening has contributed to early prevention and many lives saved as a result. Despite this, a large part of the Georgian population remains wary of the method. For example, only 8 percent of women are involved in the cervical cancer screening program – a miniscule number when compared to the same statistic in France (72 percent), the Netherlands (76 percent), Czech Republic (60 percent) or Poland (47 percent).

We asked Rema Ghvanchava, head of the National Screening Center, about the reluctance of Georgian women to undergo screening:

"Awareness plays the biggest role in this. Awareness and education. Prior to us adopting the new approach, only women who'd heard about screen-



Czech NGO Caritas, the Oncological Prevention Center, and medical-psychological center, Iamodgoma, have a project which raises awareness, and educates the population and first-tier medical operatives regarding early cancer detection and prevention



adgoma, are two years into a joint project, the purpose of which is to raise awareness and educate the population and the first-tier medical operatives regarding early cancer detection and prevention. Czech expertise, experience and professionalism have been a tremendous help in this regard – according to one of the project participants, trainer Lubomir Skopal, the current situation in Georgia is reminiscent of what was happening in the Czech Republic a few years ago. However, significant efforts aimed at awareness-raising and education have yielded impressive results.

"The project is based on a holistic approach which implies facilitating early cancer detection and prevention through strengthening the first tier of medical assistance. It is also dedicated to overcoming the stigma associated with cancer. The project has been financially supported all these years by the Czech Republic Development Agency," said Tamara Kurmanidze, project manager of Caritas, at a large-scale conference held in Zugdidi dedicated to raising the people's and first-tier medical operatives' awareness regarding cancer prevention.

It gets worse – challenges faced by the regions as described above are most acutely felt in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region, as there is no screening center there and the local denizens need to go to Kutaisi or Adjara to get involved in the program. This is theory, while in practice the number of rural denizens who actually do that is very small. As a rule, healthy people do not have much contact with doctors and are even more unlikely to cover a large distance in order to undergo a preventive procedure. Reasons for this have already been discussed – lack of awareness and education, everyday business and geographical unavailability of the program. It can be freely said that the lack of a screening center in Zugdidi negatively affects the opportunity of local denizens to make use of the program and potentially save themselves from a life-threatening condition. The good news is that such a center is about to be opened, again thanks to efforts of Caritas and the Czech Republic Development Agency. It will be equipped with the most modern technology available in Georgia, to boot.

"It will be the most modern screening center in Georgia at the moment, and I promise that it will save thousands of lives," says Ghvanchava. Stay healthy!

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