

CANCER PREVENTION MONTH

**SHELLY ALPHONSO: CANCER IS 'NO LONGER A DEATH SENTENCE'
~ ASIN-OOSTBURG ENCOURAGES EVERYBODY TO 'LOVE YOUR BODY'~**

By Judy Fitzpatrick

Fighting and overcoming diseases such as cancer can be an uphill battle. "But it isn't a death sentence," says Positive Foundation President Shelly Alphonso. "Many cancer patients have been treated effectively. Researchers are also indicating that some cancers can be prevented by opting for a healthy lifestyle," she told Health and Beauty.

February 4 was World Cancer Day and the entire month of February is National Cancer Prevention Month. Alphonso and Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) official Dr. Virginia Asin-Oostburg weighed in on the issue of cancer in an effort to shed light on this disease, which is still considered a taboo subject by many.

Asin-Oostburg believes combating cancer starts with loving one's body. "When you love your body, you will do anything to protect it. When you get a wound or if you hurt yourself and you get an injury, you ensure you treat it. Things that are on the surface are easy to treat, because your eyes can see it, so the awareness is very easy. But things that are hidden and beneath your skin, you really have to look for," said Asin-Oostburg, underlining the importance of health screening for certain forms of cancer.

She says women who love their bodies will ensure that they take the time to do self breast examinations, mammograms and pap smears, which can lead to early detection as the best prevention for breast and cervical cancers.

Asin-Oostburg is also an advocate for persons to love the body of others. "To persons around you, I would say, love that body, because then you become your brothers' and sisters' keeper. You can also be a peer educator. You and I can sit together and I can tell you about my breast exam and I would be promoting breast examination to you. I would urge you to go and do the breast examination yourself and if you're not

sure or if you find something questionable, you will know what to do and know where to go."

On the religious front she says the bible speaks about the body being the temple of God, and if the body is so sacred, then each individual should do all he or she can to protect it. One way of doing so is through regular screening to detect and prevent cancer at early stages. "If you really say you love God and if you do believe that your body is the temple of God, you won't do anything to ruin that temple," says Asin-Oostburg, who is also head of the Health Ministry's Collective Prevention Services (CPS).

Cancer is a generic term for a large group of diseases that can affect any part of the body. Other terms used are malignant tumours and neoplasms. One defining feature of cancer is the rapid creation of abnormal cells that grow beyond their usual boundaries and which can then invade adjoining parts of the body and spread to other organs. This process is referred to as metastasis. Metastases are the major cause of death from cancer.

The many possible causes include genetic factors; lifestyle factors, such as tobacco use, diet and physical activity; certain types of infections; and environmental exposures to various types of chemicals and radiation.

Alphonso says that while cancer has become a global issue, as the disease does not discriminate, it is no longer a death sentence.

She said the Positive Foundation would like to see every individual in the community get screened. "For breast cancer awareness, we say that saving your life is at your finger tips. We would like to see our community take charge of its health and live well."

Unfortunately, Alphonso says, St. Maarten does not have an accurate count of how widespread cancer is on the island. She would like to see the country introduce a chronic disease registry.

"We are a small community,

so more often than not someone will whisper he or she has been diagnosed with cancer. St. Maarten Medical Center keeps track of how many cancer patients they provide service/treatment to and the number of cancer patients is increasing by all accounts. There are some reports that the cancer is affecting younger members of our community," said Alphonso.

"It is prevalent," Asin-Oostburg concurs. Gynaecologist/obstetrician Dr. Randall Friday sounded the alarm about the increasing number of women at younger ages who were being diagnosed with cervical cancer at advanced stages. "Of course this is the same trend that we are

seeing in the region, so St. Maarten is not unique, and that was a reason for us to seriously look at cervical cancer," Asin-Oostburg said.

The government of St. Maarten started an HPV vaccination programme for young girls in 2013 in an effort to combat this trend and protect girls from this form of cancer.

"One of the things you look at is awareness. You want people to be aware, but also you want people to practise healthy behaviour, meaning to go and screen," said Asin-Oostburg, adding that as far as she was informed, most, if not all, medical insurance covers screening for cervical cancer.



Cancer is a leading cause of death worldwide and accounted for 7.6 million deaths (around 13 per cent of all deaths) in 2008. The main types of cancer are: lung (1.37 million deaths); stomach (736,000 deaths); liver (695,000 deaths); colorectal (608,000 deaths); breast (458,000 deaths) and cervical cancer (275,000 deaths). About 70 per cent of all cancer deaths occurred in low- and middle-income countries. Deaths from cancer worldwide are projected to continue to rise to over 13.1 million in 2030.

The most frequent types of cancer differ between men and women. About 30 per cent of cancer deaths are due to the five leading behavioural and dietary risks: high body mass index, low fruit and vegetable intake, lack of physical activity, tobacco use and alcohol use. Tobacco use is the most important risk factor for cancer, causing 22 per cent of global cancer deaths and 71 per cent of global lung cancer deaths. Cancer causing viral infections such as HBV/HCV and HPV are responsible for up to 20 per cent of cancer deaths in low- and middle-income countries.

In observance of Cervical Cancer Month, St. Maarten's Ministry of Public Health, in collaboration with the Pink Ribbon Foundation of Suriname and under the auspice of the Healthy Caribbean Coalition, will be hosting a cancer advocacy capacity building event in St. Maarten from February 14 to 20 (see related story).

The Positive Foundation and American University of the Caribbean (AUC) School of Medicine will also be collaborating to give demonstrations on how to do breast self examinations at Caribe Lumber Ball Park on February 23, and at the Lion's Health Fair at St. Maarten Festival Village on March 22.

For more information on cancer screening contacts your family physician.

"The screening method that is used the most in St. Maarten is the pap screening. You really want people to know that it is available, so that already from the age of 35 they can go and do a pap smear. People should also go for regular screening to ensure that they don't develop cervical cancer," Asin-Oostburg said.

Alphonso: "Early detection is the best protection. Please, do your monthly breast self examinations, request a clinical breast examination annually from age 40 or every three years between the ages for 20 to 39 years in consultation with your doctor."

Facts