

Address by H.R.H. Princess Ghida Talal of Jordan at the Opening Ceremony

Rome – Mediterranean Task Force for Cancer Control
February 2nd 2007

Your Excellencies,
Professors Crespi, Iacobelli and Montori,
Dear Friends,

Cancer. A word that instantly fills us with feelings of dread, fear, shock and helplessness. As soon as this diagnosis is uttered, our lives are turned upside down and visions of doom unfold before our eyes. Our first instinct is to try to run away and hide.

It is true that cancer is a formidable and treacherous enemy. It is true that it depletes and drains us. But it is also true that cancer is beatable, especially when detected early.

This is why we are all gathered here to unite against cancer and officially inaugurate the Mediterranean Task Force for Cancer Control (MTCC) as a non-profit international scientific association dedicated entirely to reducing cancer incidence and mortality in the Mediterranean region. MTCC aims to do this by influencing policies and promoting programs in the participating countries that aim to increase awareness on the importance of early detection and screening in order to curb the burden of cancer in the region.

The context of our meeting tonight is, sadly, a sobering one. The fact is that cancer rates worldwide are growing at alarming speed and are affecting an increasingly younger population. These chilling statistics emphasize the fact that this disease touches all of us in some way - whether as a patient, carer, relative or friend. However, as much as we try to tie cancer down to statistics, it will always remain in essence a very real and human story.

In my own personal experience, my best friend fought cancer with great courage and unshakable faith. He emerged a winner, thank God. He was 26 years old and had been married for only 6 months when he was first diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma. Fourteen years after those initial moments of despair and helplessness that greet every cancer patient, he is now able to enjoy his three lovely children. His name is Talal bin Muhammad and he is my husband.

Sadly, many people living in the Mediterranean world succumb to cancer because they are simply too scared to admit even to themselves that they may have the disease. There is also the fear of being ostracized by their communities and even sometimes by their own families. They decide instead to delay treatment with inevitably tragic consequences for the patient and his family.

As a result of the crippling fear that seizes patients when the word cancer is uttered, 80% of patients in the Mediterranean countries present themselves for treatment at the late stages of the disease, at stages III and IV when it is nearly always too late – whereas in the US, this statistic is reversed as 80% of patients present themselves at stages I & II and therefore stand a strong chance for a cure.

One of the people who strived so hard to erase the stigma associated with cancer was our beloved King Hussein. King Hussein broke our culture's taboos by openly speaking about his cancer and combating it with great faith and courage.

There is no magical formula to fighting cancer: It is only by the grace of God, early detection and access to the best medical treatments available that we can hope to overcome it. Knowledge is power. Instead of living under the shadow of myths and denials, patients must know their options and be able to act on them.

Therefore, the best defense against cancer is a good offense. There are no guaranteed outcomes, but we can do many things to reduce our risks. For women, regular screening tests such as an annual mammogram and a breast exam during an annual checkup are a must, as is a yearly colonoscopy for men. As simple as it sounds, early detection of the tumor can literally mean the difference between life and death for the patient.

I am proud to say that the King Hussein Cancer Center is now one of the most prominent comprehensive cancer centers in the entire Middle East, for both adult and pediatric patients, and is a treasure in its own right.

For the past four years, the King Hussein Cancer Center has been linked to two of the best cancer centers in the world for adults and children - the U.S. National Cancer Institute and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. As a result, miracles have been achieved at the Center, benefiting thousands of patients from all over the Arab world - patients who might have otherwise been doomed.

One of our proudest achievements is that we pioneered the concept of comprehensive cancer care in Jordan. The first step was the assembling of an exceptional medical team that covers all of the disciplines necessary for cancer treatment - together under one roof. Under the inspiring leadership of Dr. Mahmoud Sarhan, this highly qualified team of over 70 oncologists is complemented by state-of-the-art medical equipment.

Our latest achievement is to have obtained accreditation by the most important body that accredits hospitals in the world, the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO), which is the most valuable stamp of quality a hospital can have.

In our mission to break the cycle of death resulting from the persistent taboos in the Mediterranean culture, the King Hussein Cancer Center has taken a number of steps to raise awareness and to engrave the message that “early detection can save your life”. Towards that goal, the Center has established the “Office of Cancer Communication and Public Awareness” which is responsible for the outreach programs and has a Screening and Early Detection Clinic which offers tests and advice on follow up. Lectures are organized throughout the Kingdom in schools and universities and professional associations. Moreover, the Center offers a 24 hours hotline which fields thousands of calls from members of the public inquiring about anything related to cancer.

On a national scale, the King Hussein Cancer Foundation, under the direction of Princess Dina, and the King Hussein Cancer Center, under the direction of Dr. Sarhan, have been chosen to lead an aggressive nation-wide campaign to promote the early detection of breast cancer which is a curse plaguing the lives of millions of women worldwide and the number one cancer afflicting women in our country.

For the first time in Jordan, the Ministry of Health, the King Hussein Cancer Foundation and Center as well as USAID have all united to develop a comprehensive Early Detection and Screening Program for Jordan. The resulting “National Breast Cancer Committee” was entrusted with the following aims:

- First, To Reduce morbidity and mortality from breast cancer by early detection and screening and
- Second, To Shift the current state of diagnosis of Breast Cancer from its late stages (III-IV), which is associated with high mortality rates, to diagnosing Breast Cancer at its earliest stages (0-II) where the disease is most curable and survival rates are at its highest.

This seven-year plan will address all issues relevant to that goal, including public awareness and education, the training of physicians and nurses, ensuring the accessibility of mammograms as well as financial help for those who need it.

This is why our meeting in Rome is so crucial. The official launch of the Mediterranean Task Force for Cancer Control represents the beginning of a long-term commitment to relegating cancer to being a disease of the past. It is a challenge that requires the active support of each and every one of us, as well as all government, NGO and private institutions - in order for this dream to become a reality. It is only by taking a truly collaborative approach can we hope to bring about substantial changes in people's attitudes towards their illness and their hopes of overcoming it.

We all acknowledge that the battle is far from won and the challenges are great. Yet it is important to remember that lives are being saved every second of every day and we continue to make great strides against this indiscriminating disease.

All of us in Jordan look forward to pursuing many avenues of cooperation between the Mediterranean Task Force for Cancer Control and the King Hussein Cancer Foundation and Center. I know that I speak for all of us when I say that we are all here this evening for one goal, and one goal only – which is to reduce the mortality of our citizens from a disease that can be treated successfully when detected early.

This is the only way that we can hope for our mothers and daughters, our fathers and sons and all our loved ones to rejoin their lives as happy, healthy and productive members of their communities.