

## BREAST CANCER PATIENTS AND SURVIVORS IN THE EU WORKFORCE

ITALY: AN OVERLY COMPLEX MAZE OF GOOD INTENTIONS



## This report is part of a series of profiles focusing on the main employment-related issues affecting female breast cancer patients and survivors in selected EU countries.<sup>1</sup>

Key data	
Crude breast cancer incidence rate per 100,000:	162.9 (2012, IARC)
Breast cancer prevalence (five-year) per 100,000:	775.6 (2012, IARC)
Labour force participation rate—general:	65.0% (2015, OECD)
Labour force participation rate—women aged 40-64:	56.7% (2015, EIU calculations from OECD data)
Unemployment rate—general:	12.1% (2015, OECD)
Unemployment rate—women aged 40-64:	7.8% (2015, EIU calculations from OECD data)

Italy faces a substantial breast cancer burden. In 2012 its crude annual incidence rate, at 162.9 per 100,000 women,<sup>2</sup> was the sixth-highest in Europe, and 209,000 women were affected by the disease in the five years before 2012. More troubling, this figure is also much greater than that of most of Italy's neighbours: the collective crude rate of other south European countries is only 102.4 per 100,000,<sup>3</sup> and that of nearby Spain, with a similar level of economic development, is 106.6 per 100,000 women. Italy's older population contributes to this greater incidence. After Germany, it has Europe's highest median age (45.9).<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this is only part of the problem. Italy's age-standardised breast cancer incidence rate (91.3 per 100,000 women) would be about average in western or northern Europe but is well above that of its neighbours. That of Spain, for example, is more than one-quarter less at 67.3 per 100,000 women.

Meanwhile, Italian women aged 40-64—years when the risk of breast cancer grows markedly—have become increasingly integrated into to the workforce. Between 2005 and 2015 the labour force participation rate for this group rose from 45.7% to 56.7%, while that of the population as a whole changed much less, increasing from 62.4% to 65%. Italian women aged 40-64, as a group, are also more likely to be employed than their peers of other ages. Looking ahead, the proportion of older women in work should continue to rise. The EU projects that the labour force participation rate for Italian women aged 55-65 will grow from 38% in 2015 to 56.7% by 2030.<sup>5</sup>

Little hard data exist on return-to-work rates for Italian women diagnosed with breast cancer, although a small, single-centre study found that after two years 77.9% had resumed employment, which is in line with much of the rest of the continent.<sup>6</sup>

More general data, meanwhile, show that cancer as a whole is noticeably influencing the Italian workforce. Cancer, according to the National Social Security Institute (Istituto Nazionale della

- Although male breast cancer does occur, it is very rare, with an age-adjusted incidence of less than 1 per 100,000 in most of Europe and no clear sign of increase or decrease (Diana Ly et al., "An International Comparison of Male and Female Breast Cancer Incidence Rates", International Journal of Cancer, 2012). This study therefore deals exclusively with female breast cancer.
- <sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise stated, incidence, mortality and prevalence data are estimates by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) of the situation in 2012, the latest internationally comparable figures available.
- <sup>3</sup> EIU calculation based on IARC data.
- <sup>4</sup> UN Population Division, World Population Prospects, The 2015 Revision, 2015.
- <sup>5</sup> European Commission, The 2015 Ageing Report: Underlying Assumptions and Projection Methodologies, 2014.

SPONSORED BY



## BREAST CANCER PATIENTS AND SURVIVORS IN THE EU WORKFORCE ITALY: AN OVERLY COMPLEX MAZE OF GOOD INTENTIONS

Previdenza Sociale), is the most common cause of workplace disability (32% of all registered cases) in the country. A 2012 study carried out by Censis, a socioeconomic research institute, on behalf of the Italian Federation of Volunteering Organisations in Oncology (Federazione Italiana delle Associazioni di Volontariato in Oncologia) calculated that in the country, out of a total of about 1m cancer survivors of working age 274,000 had experienced lay-offs, forced retirement or dismissal, or had ceased their self-employment activity as a result of a cancer diagnosis. With roughly 20% of Italian cancer prevalence the result of breast cancer, presumably a similar proportion of those who lost work had this form of the disease.

Such an estimate would be consistent with a smaller but more detailed 2016 study by Europa Donna Italia—the Italian member of the European Breast Cancer Coalition, a non-profit organisation—and Euromedia Research. It consisted of in-depth interviews with 122 working women who developed breast cancer and found that roughly half experienced some problems returning to work, with 24% overall saying that they had difficulty exercising their legal rights or suffered workplace penalties as a result of their diagnosis. A number of women reported that they had even faced demotion and removal from positions of responsibility, as well as discrimination from managers and colleagues.<sup>10</sup>

Part of the problem is likely to be caused by ongoing cancer stigma having an impact on employment. The authors of a Sicilian academic study in 2013 opined that "our culture continues to perpetuate the ... view that an individual with cancer is somehow now defective", and that "employers continue to perceive cancer survivors as poor risks for advancement".<sup>11</sup>

However, these difficulties, while real, need to be considered in context. A majority of breast cancer patients and survivors returning to work are treated well: over seven out of ten women in the Europa Donna study reported a positive response by senior managers to work-time rescheduling requests related to their breast cancer.<sup>12</sup>

Cancer patients and survivors in Italy also have a substantial number of employment rights. Some arise from disability legislation—cancer patients are able to obtain temporary disability status. An employee certified by the authorities to have a sufficient degree of disability can, among other things, insist on being transferred to a work location nearer to her home if available and be given tasks consistent with her restricted physical capacities. She is also eligible to be counted in the percentage of disabled employees which Italian law requires enterprises to include in their workforce.

Meanwhile, those living with cancer or its aftermath benefit from specific protections. In particular, they have the right to go from full-time to part-time work during or following treatment and to

- <sup>6</sup> Luigi Cavanna et al., "Return to work after treatment for breast cancer", Breast Cancer Research and Treatment, 2011.
- <sup>7</sup> "Malati di cancro e lavoro: storie di mobbing e stipendi ridotti", *Corriere* della Serra, March 26th 2009.
- Osservatorio sulla condizione assistenziale dei malati oncologici, 4° Rapporto sulla condizione assistenziale dei malati oncologici, 2012.
- <sup>9</sup> EIU calculation based on EUCAN, "Country Factsheet: Italy". Available at: http://eco. iarc.fr/ eucan/Country. aspx?ISOCountryCd=380.
- <sup>10</sup> Europa Donna presentation, "Tumore al Seno: Il rapporto lavoratrice-azienda e il rientro post malattia, Sintesi dei Risultati", February 2015. Available at: http://europadonna.it/wpcontent/uploads/2015/02/Pres.-Tumore-e-Lavoro-16\_02\_2015.pdf.
- "The Role of Work in Breast Cancer Patients", Journal of Cancer Therapy, 2013.
- <sup>12</sup> Europa Donna, "Tumore al Seno".

## BREAST CANCER PATIENTS AND SURVIVORS IN THE EU WORKFORCE ITALY: AN OVERLY COMPLEX MAZE OF GOOD INTENTIONS

return to full-time employment later, as well as the right not to be made to work a night shift. Finally, certain national collective bargaining agreements provide further protections for workers in specific industries, including days taken off for cancer care and treatment not even being counted against sick days.<sup>13</sup>

The problem is that in practice few patients take advantage of these legal and other protections, which might otherwise keep them in the workforce. For example, only 11% of women with cancer make use of the opportunity to work part-time.<sup>14</sup>

The limited use of these legal rights probably arises not from specific provisions of Italian law but from the overall complexity of the legal situation. The protections available to cancer survivors rely on a large number of individual pieces of legislation, which are in turn overseen by different government agencies. In practice, the implementation rules can be complex and bureaucratic for anyone, let alone someone who is undergoing cancer treatment. For example, the circulars regarding paid leave issued by various relevant state agencies are contradictory.<sup>15</sup>

A still bigger problem for patients and survivors is that finding out about one's rights is very difficult. In the Europa Donna study mentioned earlier, 63% of women reported that the level of information available in Italy was so inadequate that it required paying an expert for advice. A small survey of companies, which Europa Donna undertook in parallel, found that 29% of these firms had no knowledge of the employment rights of cancer survivors in their workforces, and an additional 43% had only a superficial understanding. <sup>16</sup> This is the case even though many of the key pieces of legislation discussed above are more than a decade old.

Cancer activists are taking steps to improve the situation. The Italian Association of Cancer Patients (Associazione Italiana Malati di Cancro), the Joint Foundation Against Cancer (Fondazione Insieme Contro il Cancro), the National Cancer Institute (Istituto Nazionale Tumori) and academics at the University of Milan have established Pro-Job, a consultancy to help employers understand their legal responsibilities and to reintegrate cancer patients into the workforce. The idea won a Social Innovation Award in 2012 from Soliditas, an Italian corporate sustainability business group. Europa Donna, meanwhile, is pushing for the consolidation and harmonisation of the laws around cancer and better survivor and patient access to information regarding their employment rights.

Getting women who have experienced breast cancer back into the workforce is a growing challenge for Italy. It now needs to find ways to make its good intentions support better employment outcomes.

- <sup>13</sup> For details on these rights and their limitations, see AlMaC, I diritti del malato di cancro, 2016.
- <sup>14</sup> Osservatorio sulla condizione assistenziale dei malati oncologici, 4° *Rapporto*.
- <sup>15</sup> "Disoccupate dopo il tumore", *La Repubblica* (*Salute Seno*), May 23rd 2014.
- <sup>16</sup> Europa Donna, "Tumore al Seno"; "Cancro al seno, quando si ammala una lavoratrice", *La Repubblica* (Salute Seno), March 6th 2015.

SPONSORED BY

