

Welcome and opening address

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, friends and advocates.

Two years ago, in this room, EDI's first national Conference was addressed by Prof Niall O'Higgins on the importance of SBC's and the slow progress that was being made in Ireland. At the time, at the instigation of Minister Harney, he was leading a team to develop the National Quality Assurance standards for Symptomatic Breast Disease Services.

A year later May 07, Minister Harney launched those standards and in the face of continued resistance set about pushing forward on the recommendations of the National Cancer Forum and securing the services of Prof Tom Keane from British Columbia to lead the Cancer Control Programme in Ireland. It is Europa Donna's great pleasure to welcome both Professor Niall O'Higgins and Professor Tom Keane.

At the same time, the first in a series of shocking revelations of errors and misdiagnosis broke with the extraordinary courage of Rebecca O'Malley to make public her experience so that lessons could be learnt from it.

- Each scandal brings with it its own wave of anxiety affecting women all over the country. – this is an intolerable situation and we applaud the bravery of those women and their families that have come forward, but it isn't the way it should have to happen.

Six reports on errors and misdiagnosis later – all pointing to the need for state of the art Specialist Breast Centres and in the last 3 weeks tragically the deaths of Ann Moriarity and Edel Kelly bring yet again into sharp focus, how dangerous this disease is, how you don't cut corners with it and the utmost importance and urgency of having Specialist Breast Centres in place for the diagnosis, treatment and follow-up of breast cancer.

This is the theme of our Conference, this is your conference, women with experience of breast cancer either personally or through relatives, and friends. Your voices, your needs... And we thank you for coming.

With approx 2000 women diagnosed a year in Ireland and 650 deaths there is no room for complacency, a twenty per cent reduction in mortality rates translates into 130 women who are going to lose their lives prematurely as long as we delay the roll outs.

There is irrefutable evidence that a woman's chances of surviving a diagnosis of breast cancer are significantly increased through early detection and attendance at a Specialist Breast Centre. Survival and quality of life is more important than the temporary inconvenience of travelling. But the arrangements must also be in place to support those women who do have to travel .

It is also important to ensure that there is supportive care in their communities for women with access to professional support and services. Cancer support centres – many of whom have stands here today, are doing excellent work often with just

volunteer workers. They need to be resourced and supported and available nationwide.

We appeal to those politicians, health professionals and women who are campaigning for services in their local areas to get behind the drive to establish and resource the Specialist Breast Centre's and have them ultimately independently accredited by HIQA, and we welcome Dr. Tracey Cooper who is also here with us this morning.

This drive must not be affected by Government cutbacks and we appeal to the Minister to ensure that they are up and running within the timeframe and in the meantime it is essential that women and health professionals know what the transitional arrangements are.

Breast cancer is the trail blazer for other cancers – this is no coincidence – it is not just because it is the most common cancer and leading cause of cancer death among women, but because of the strength and solidarity of women in making their voices heard in the battle against this disease – and we are delighted to welcome advocates Tina Mc Grath from Ireland and Judy Caldwell, Founder of the British Columbian branch of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation who will be sharing their experiences with us today.

It is now my great pleasure to give a very warm welcome to Minister Harney and ask her to address you and open our Conference.