



A World Without CANCER

Princess Nikky Onyeri has been credited with raising the profile of cancer in Nigeria and throughout Africa. Her unwavering commitment to improve awareness of breast and cervical cancer on the continent has been described as exemplary. She tells **Belinda Otas** why her vision is for an Africa without cancer.



Although her primary focus was on breast cancer, campaigner Princess Nikky Onyeri explains, there is a realisation that “we are dealing with the same woman, therefore we must include breast and cervical cancer in the fight because it would be terrible that you educate a woman on breast cancer and she later dies of cervical cancer.” Nigerian Onyeri, who herself was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1993, has made it her life’s goal to reach out to other women in the same situation. A tenacious advocate who says she is not one to take no for an answer, Onyeri campaigns on behalf of African women the world over, seeking a solution to what she calls ‘Africa’s burden’. “There has been this belief around the world that the diseases we have here are malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/Aids, but I have raised my voice a lot of times in meetings at international and regional conferences that we have an epidemic coming and it’s not just that, it is already with us and it’s going to get worse if something is not done now.”

Onyeri has taken her own advice; she cut her hair and symbolically wears pink to identify with sufferers, and she champions the fight against a disease which affects millions of women across the world. Through her Princess Nikky Foundation, she campaigns for better awareness in African nations, lobbies their governments and international health organisations.

When she first started, Onyeri says it was unheard of that anyone would go on television to publicly declare they suffer from cancer, but now, “people talk about it openly, saying they have breast cancer, they are surviv-

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ing and while some are still undergoing treatment, so much has changed in Nigeria and across Africa”.

Onyeri’s campaign goes to the grass-roots to inform and educate women. “We don’t just do it in the English language. We have a lot of women in Africa who are uneducated. The best thing is to do the campaign in the local language in order to get the message to them. The beauty of it is the fact that as more women are becoming aware, they are realising that a lot of people they have seen die from other diseases really died of cancer.”

Onyeri admits there are still huge obstacles to overcome that continue to plague healthcare in Africa, notably poverty, lack of education, low socio-economic and inadequate medical infrastructures. One of the foremost barriers is the lack of financial resources to treat cancer.

Currently funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Onyeri says securing funding is one of the biggest hurdles within Nigeria and Africa. In addition, there is the issue of society’s attitude and ignorance about the reality of cancer. “The fact is that, in Africa, this is one disease that is still clouded with a lot of traditional and cultural barriers to break down. In some places, when people have cancer they call it another name because they don’t want to be associated with it due to the fact that if they say they have breast cancer, there is this fear that the family might be stigmatised and their daughter might not be able to get married because people will say this is a disease that passes from mother to daughter.”

While Onyeri agrees there are some cancers which are hereditary, she says it should not cause such a barrier

as currently exists in Africa. However, she adds, “the story behind all this is the fact that awareness is here and the world is suddenly realising that there is a huge burden in Africa, especially breast and cervical cancer”.

Onyeri also cites the challenge of traditional, cultural and religious leaders. “There are so many forces; we have the traditional and religious healers who talk of healing. These are powerful leaders the people know, believe and trust.” For this reason, her campaign now invites traditional healers and religious leaders to meetings.

“To the traditional healers, we are telling them that we are not driving you out of your market or saying you are bad but, please, when you notice this strange disease that you don’t have any idea about, send them to the hospital. We need your help to be able to solve this problem,” she says. She calls it the ‘getting-your-message-in-through-the-back-door approach’ because when traditional, religious and cultural leaders sit at the same table with scientists and policy-makers and share ideas and information, it is a powerful way to reach out.

Under the umbrella of the Princess Nikky Foundation, Onyeri has successfully fought for the establishment of National Cancer Plans in Africa, as, she says, most African countries still lack a cancer plan or policy. “Cancer needs to be put on the health agenda and not where it currently is, as a non-communicable disease. If the presidents and African Union can make a policy statement, saying we have decided that we are going to focus attention on cancer in Africa, things will change. It will become a priority and then we can talk about creating more awareness, immunisations,

Nneka, right, and below with her MOBO award for Best African Act 2009

drugs and treatment, which if it is not free, should be subsidised.”

Onyeri has also been instrumental in setting up other bodies such as the Forum of African First Ladies Against Breast & Cervical Cancer, African Parliamentarians & Health Ministers Against Cancer, the Stop Cervical Cancer in Africa Conference and the Annual Africa Breast Cancer Conference.

The Forum of African First Ladies Against Cancer is a group that brings the first ladies of African countries together to serve as one voice in the war against cancer on the continent. Established in Cape Town, South Africa in 2009, Mrs Janet Museveni is currently its chairperson, with Madame Thobeka Madiba-Zuma, South Africa’s First Lady, as vice-chairperson. The Forum also has the first ladies of Ghana, Zambia, Kenya, Gambia, Tanzania, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Swaziland on board.

Onyeri’s drive to make a change has won her allies in unlikely quarters. She counts President Jacob Zuma of South Africa, Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania, Bingu wa Mutharika of Malawi, who lost his wife to cancer in 2007, and the King of Swaziland as supporters of her work.

“They have assured us that they are willing to take this up and champion it at the African Union. So, 2010 is an exciting year for us. We are going to break down a lot of barriers and women’s health issues is going to be placed on the front-burner of things. We are not going to sit back for people to do things for us. We are going to let the world know that we are ready to take this programme up and do things for our women, the bedrock of our society, and we hope the world will help us to achieve our aim.”

The Annual Africa Breast Cancer Conference and Stop Cervical Cancer in Africa Conference, now in their third and fourth year, respectively, are gaining momentum. The former was recently held in Kampala, Uganda, and plans are underway for the next Stop Cervical Cancer in Africa Conference to be held in Accra, Ghana. “Cervical cancer is the number one burden disease in Africa, followed by breast cancer, and 80% of the whole cervical cancer in the world occurs in Africa,” says Onyeri. For this reason, she adds, no one can afford to do nothing.

Onyeri has witnessed women not taking good care of themselves in Africa and other parts of the world and it is her vision that women’s health should one day be brought under one umbrella – an integrated holistic approach to health, which she believes will provide a good way to teach women about taking better care of themselves.

“It should no longer be a single disease approach,” she says. “Hence, when you get a woman, you educate her on breast cancer, cancer of the cervix, hypertension and diabetes, and the things she is most likely to deal with in life. I think that should be a better way to help the women on our continent.” ■