

Press Release

This breast cancer month, we need to ask why are we still ignoring the elephant in the room?

As we find ourselves mid-way through the global fundraising phenomena that is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, *From Pink to Prevention* asks 'are environmental and occupational risk factors for the disease the elephant in the room?'

Given breast cancer incidence has risen by 64% since the 1970's in the UK, why are increasing efforts to draw attention to these confounding risk factors met with an unyielding lack of acknowledgement by the breast cancer establishment which includes the government, and breast cancer charities?

From Pink To Prevention (FPTP) and the Alliance for Cancer Prevention argues that everybody, especially women who are more at risk of breast cancer, have the 'right to know' the up-to-date science on breast cancer which, for decades, has been linking the escalating rates of breast cancer with exposures to toxic chemicals in our homes, workplaces and wider environment along with workplaces practices such as night shift work.

This October FPTP has produced a new Tool-Kit with interactive webpage, posters and action guide and with contributions from some of the leading experts, writers and campaigners from across Europe (Belgium, France, Germany, UK), USA, Canada, Australia and the Philippines. It advocates that that it is time to move from pink to prevention, beginning by renaming the month *Breast Cancer Prevention Month*, as suggested by Gudrun Kemper from Breast Cancer Action Germany.

Lisette Van Vliet from the [Health and Environment Alliance](#) cites the call by the World Health Organisation for the recognition of the environmental and occupational exposures that cause cancer to be an integral component of cancer control worldwide. As [Professor Andrew Watterson](#) points out, assessments estimate that there are at least 50% of breast cancers we can't explain, so a good starting place would be to remove the carcinogens, some 216 chemicals in regular commercial use, that have been linked to breast cancer.

From Pink to Prevention [campaigner](#) Diana Ward is disturbed to discover the failure of leading breast cancer charities to inform women about all the risk factors, and questions the exclusive focus on lifestyle factors (alcohol, exercise and smoking) and the 10% of cases linked to genetic factors, to the exclusion of the impact toxic chemicals are having on the health of every single one of us. Given that the vast amount of existing research into lifelong (womb to grave) exposures to environmental and occupational risk factors and the fact that breast cancer is a hormonal disease, this selective narrative could be seen as a barrier to official and public recognition of the right to know.

In her film 'Endocrination', [Stephane Horel](#) very effectively outlines the blocking by the chemical lobby of progressive legislation by the EU to try and control exposure to Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) – chemical which affect our body's messenger system and so all aspects of life. EDCs have been linked to

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breast and other cancers as well as damaging our reproduction, growth and development. Studies have shown that these EDCs build up in human body tissue and can be detected in our blood, urine and breast milk, up to 300 different manmade chemicals have been detected in the human body.

Researchers [Dr. Jim Brophy and Dr. Margaret Keith](#) are concerned that workplace exposures can take many forms and think we should use workers' health as a barometer for the wellbeing of the whole of society. Toxic chemicals used and produced in the workplace find their way into our general environment where they pose a threat to people of all ages. Their investigation into occupational breast cancer in Canada showed an elevated breast cancer risk for women working in agriculture and metal working, with women in both automotive plastics and food canning having an almost five-fold risk.

Toxic chemicals linked to breast and other cancers or to other illnesses and diseases have no place in our bodies. It's not just EDCs but a host of other breast cancer carcinogens as well as physical risk factors such as shift work and ionising radiation which need to be urgently addressed. Helen Lynn, [Alliance for Cancer Prevention](#) and *From Pink to Prevention* campaigner, questions why, when we know about the links between these carcinogens and breast cancer, we aren't asking the question why environmental and occupational risk factors for breast cancer are not included and actioned in every cancer plan and strategy?

In Europe, [Women in Europe for a Common Future's](#) executive director Sascha Gabizon asks why primary prevention (stopping the disease before it starts) is being ignored in favour of an unsustainable and costly epidemic? Survival rates continue to fall despite increased spending. Every 6 minutes a woman dies from breast cancer in the EU. WECF, as the women's organisation working on health and the environment, calls on the EU for a strategy on the primary prevention of breast cancer.

Forty years ago breast cancer was a disease of the wealthier nations but now half of all breast cancers are occurring in countries which are rapidly being industrialised, such as the Philippines. Danny de Meneses from the [Philippine Breast Cancer Network](#) is very concerned about the Philippines having the highest incidence rate of breast cancer in Asia and the highest increase of 589% among 187 countries over a 30 year period from 1980 to 2010. It has the 11th highest incidence rate of breast cancer in the world.

Hilda Palmer from the [Hazards Campaign](#) thinks some Trade Unions could be doing more by taking a proactive and preventive approach to cancer caused by work. Occupational cancer should be a priority, starting by addressing the 16% of occupational cancers through the empowerment of Safety Reps to use the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) regulations. Safety Representatives need information and support on how to hold employers to their legal duty to prevent exposure to chemical carcinogens, and how to challenge and negotiate shift patterns for all workers and night work for women which increases the risk of breast cancer.

Green Party MP [Caroline Lucas](#) thinks we still have some way to go before we take a precautionary approach to risks associated with breast cancer but quotes the US scientist Sandra Steingraber, who says "From the right to know and the duty to inquire flows the obligation to act."

The global Pink Ribbon has become the most prominent global icon of a deadly disease according to academic and campaigner [Grazia de Michele](#), who argues that breast cancer is anything but 'feminine, joyful and relaxing'. The Pink Ribbon, used to sell products, many of which themselves contain chemicals linked to breast cancer, range from cosmetics to food, jewellery, clothing and even cars and drill bits. As a result, it has 'normalised' the fact that thousands of women worldwide are diagnosed with and die from breast cancer. The original aim - to spur public opinion to demand political change - was deflected, some would say stolen - by a capitalist system where the combination of marketing skills and our own purchasing power can guarantee corporates unlimited 'pink' profiteering.

While we do not want to undermine those who gain hope, strength and a sense of community from pink ribbon fundraising, we do need to ask questions about the pink ribbon brand. Patricia Kearns from [Breast Cancer Action Quebec](#) and adviser for the film 'Pink Ribbons Inc' notes the growing criticism of the trend for business to 'cash in' on the disease. "[Pink-washing](#)" means, on the one hand selling products to raise money for the disease while on the other, using ingredients in that product which linked to causing the disease. Breast cancer is a good cause for big corporations as women make 80% of the buying decisions but with less than 5% of the money raised spent on primary prevention and finding the root cause of the disease, questions need to be asked before hands are put into purses.

No one is saying that healthy lifestyles aren't admirable, and encouragement to eat well and exercise is a positive thing but [Challenge Breast Cancer Scotland](#) questions why many healthy women still get breast cancer? Moira Adams bemoans the continual lecturing to women on how they are to blame for their own breast cancer with the almost exclusive focus on healthy lifestyle. This October CBCS's message is: *Stop passing the buck to women and start taking responsibility for our polluted environment and the chemical cocktails we are subjected to on a daily basis.*

Deborah Burton from *Pink to Prevention* [campaigner](#) thinks the ultimate responsibility for primary prevention *should* lie with government but that this is patently not the case. There are myriad ways in which the [cancer establishment](#) has proven its capacity in blocking any debate, recognition and action on the role of environmental and occupational factors for breast cancer. This means that as long as national cancer practices and policies continue to be so influenced by the cancer establishment, environmental and occupational risk factors will be excluded from government agendas.

Scottish Campaigner [Dr. Morag Parnell](#) asks why current trends are being slavishly accepted, given the role that industrialisation has played in its links to the growth of cancer diagnoses. We need look no further than the WHO's global cancer map. Lack of political will by governments to eliminate human exposure to such chemicals and substances already known to be carcinogenic is overlooked in favour of asking science and commerce to invent new disease detection and treatments. In themselves they are needed but they do little to prevent exposures wherever possible, while much money is made out of them.

Gayle Sulik from the [Breast Cancer Consortium](#) believes there is an urgent need to change the conversation around breast cancer and to 'get real' about this disease and to acknowledge that there is an ocean of misinformation, trivialization, and commercialization that is undermining the movement, and the breast cancer cause itself. What's more, pink ribbon hype diverts money and attention away from endeavours and ideas that have a greater chance of making a real difference to the diagnosed, those at risk, and the epidemic at large.

We have to acknowledge what women have already achieved in making breast cancer a national priority increasing awareness and funding for better treatment and care. But we need to move beyond the pink ribbon version of awareness. We need truth. Evidence. Action.

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Notes to Editor:

- i. On line Tool Kit and posters: ***From Pink to Prevention and the Alliance for Cancer Prevention***

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campaign has produced an online [‘tool-kit’](#) to help the wider public understand the links between environmental and occupational risk factors and the obstacles that stand in the way of these risk factors being accepted and acted on by government, breast cancer charities and industry. The toolkit includes an interactive webpage, downloadable posters and a guide on how to be better informed and take action.

- ii. [Scientific Evidence](#) linking breast cancer and environmental and occupational risk factors.
- iii. EDM ***Early Day Motion on environmental and occupational risk factors*** . Caroline Lucas MP will table an Early Day Motion to Parliament calling upon the Government to act upon the urgent inclusion of environmental and occupational risk factors into all National Cancer Plans and strategies. More information on the [FPTP](#) website.
- I. FPTP is organising a Book Launch on the 31st of October in London of *So Much to Be Done* by Barbara Brenner. The event is support by Unison, the Alliance for Cancer Prevention and the Breast Cancer Consortium. More information [here](#).



Alliance for
Cancer Prevention