Standing Together Against Cancer

How research, voluntary commitment and solidarity help people affected by cancer

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When Jennifer Stepney decided to have a dry patch of skin removed from the area between her forehead and nose at the beginning of the year, she had no idea what lay ahead. Unable to get a timely appointment with a dermatologist, she turned to a private doctor, who removed the suspicious area. It was only the subsequent examination that confirmed her diagnosis: skin cancer. At first, the 80-year-old struggled to comprehend the news.

What initially appeared to be a relatively straightforward procedure developed into a lengthy course of treatment. The affected area was operated on repeatedly, but cancer cells remained each time. During a more extensive operation, a plastic surgeon removed the affected tissue. However, even after this procedure, the cancer had not been completely eliminated. Radiotherapy in Benidorm became necessary.

Jennifer Stepney's story is not an isolated case. According to forecasts by Spain's Network of Cancer Registries (REDECAN), a total of 301,884 people in Spain will be diagnosed with cancer this year. Among men, prostate, bladder and bowel cancer are the most common types, while among women, breast, bowel and lung cancer occur most frequently. The risk of developing cancer increases significantly with age. Around 60.7 per cent of projected cases involve people over the age of 65, while only 5.5 per cent occur in the under-45 age group.

Searching for answers

Jennifer Stepney has survived cancer. Among people diagnosed with cancer in Spain between 2013 and 2017, the five-year survival rate was 57.5 per cent for men and 65.2 per cent for women.

Research plays a crucial role in ensuring that these figures continue to improve. Alejandro Berenguer is working to increase the chances of survival for cancer patients. The 25-year-old comes from Alcoy and conducts research at the La Fe Health Research Institute (IIS La Fe) in Valencia, where he is working towards new insights into cancer.

His daily routine alternates between the office and working from home. In fact, he does not spend every day in a white lab coat examining tumour samples. The much more challenging part of his work, he explains, is analysing the data collected – a task he carries out at his computer.

After completing a four-year degree in biochemistry at the University of Valencia, he went on to obtain a two-year Master's degree in Biomedical Biotechnology at the Polytechnic University of Valencia.

For just over a year now, he has been working at Hospital La Fe on his doctoral thesis, which focuses on sarcomas, a very rare type of cancer.

" Sarcomas account for less than one per cent of all cancer cases diagnosed in Spain. They develop in mesenchymal tissue, meaning either in the bones or in soft tissues such as muscles and fatty tissue, which provide support to our bodies," Berenguer explains.

Sarcomas are not only rare but also highly diverse: specialists distinguish between more than 50 different subtypes.

"When a disease is rare and there are so many different types, research becomes particularly difficult. It is often hard to collect enough meaningful samples to carry out sufficiently large studies," Berenguer explains.

Every step counts

Alejandro Berenguer's work is supported by the Spanish Association Against Cancer (Asociación Española Contra el Cáncer – AECC).

The organisation has a history spanning more than 70 years. In addition to supporting people affected by cancer, it is particularly committed to advancing cancer research. To fund this work, it regularly organises fundraising campaigns and events, such as Runcancer, a running event that encourages people to get active for a good cause.

This support is essential for research.

"It's not just about going for a run and improving your personal best, although that's obviously great too. Every euro donated, every step and every kilometre makes a difference," Berenguer emphasises.

The future of cancer research in Spain is uncertain for many young scientists.

"The biggest problem is the precarious employment situation. Salaries are low and the professional future is uncertain," says Berenguer.

Many researchers work on fixed-term grants, often lasting just two years. Once that period ends, they have to hope that further funding will become available so they can continue their work.

"Of course, this makes long-term life planning difficult, for example when you want to start a family or build a stable life. At the same time, I love my work. It fascinates me, so it often doesn't even feel like work," Berenguer says with a smile.

Nevertheless, at some point he and his colleagues face the question of whether to stay in Spain or move abroad. Although researchers in other European countries may not necessarily earn top salaries, they often benefit from greater job security, he explains.

Alongside funding research, supporting people affected by cancer in their everyday lives is another important task of the Spanish Cancer Association. This includes psychological support services and providing new mattresses for people receiving palliative care at home.

Support on the Costa Blanca

Jennifer Stepney experienced first-hand just how important practical support can be.

During her illness, she received assistance from Mabs, the Marina Alta Breast Cancer Support Group. Jennifer regularly got into the cars of volunteer drivers who took her to radiotherapy appointments in Benidorm and to operations in Valencia or Dénia.

Mabs was founded in 1995 by five British women who had themselves been diagnosed with breast cancer and had no family nearby.

"Today, I would say that around half of the people we support come from other countries, including Spain, the Netherlands and Germany. And we no longer focus exclusively on breast cancer – we support people affected by all types of cancer," explains Irena Bodnarec, Mabs' area coordinator on the Costa Blanca.

The organisation funds its work through three charity shops in Oliva, Jávea and L'Alfàs del Pi on the Costa Blanca, three more on the Costa Cálida, as well as donations and fundraising events.

Last year, it supported 419 people with cancer.

In addition to transport services, Mabs also funds care services, medical equipment, physiotherapy and translation services.

The organisation is currently setting up a visiting and companionship service as well.

"Many of the people who come to us live alone and don't have any family nearby. I think they would really appreciate having someone visit them or accompany them

to their medical appointments. When you don't have family close by, having cancer can be a very lonely journey," says Bodnarec.

No one has to face it alone

Jennifer Stepney and her husband Chris have lived in Jávea for 16 years. Throughout her illness, he was always by her side.

However, Chris Stepney also received support from Mabs, even though he was not the one who had cancer. An injury to his upper arm and shoulder limits his ability to drive, meaning he could not take Jennifer to every appointment, although he accompanied her whenever possible.

When Jennifer had to travel to Valencia for an operation, Chris therefore stayed overnight in a hotel. Mabs even checked in on him while he was there.

"I wrote to them saying that I had to book a hotel, even though I had never booked a hotel room myself in my entire life. I hadn't even bought a pair of underpants myself before! They wrote back: 'You're doing really well, Chris. You're doing a great job.' That makes you feel good," he recalls.

After 33 radiotherapy sessions in Benidorm, Jennifer was finally able to ring the bell on 24 July, marking the successful completion of her treatment.

It was a very emotional moment for the couple.

What helped Jennifer through such a difficult time? She laughs as Chris Stepney points to himself.

"Did you see that? He's pointing at himself!"

She explains that she tried to take each day as it came and continue her everyday life as normally as possible.

Chris Stepney says people should follow his wife's example:

"You have to face it with composure and fight back. And when you're married, you have to be there for each other."

Jennifer Stepney adds:

"You shouldn't worry too much either, and you should trust your doctors, because you're in good hands."

A Moustache with a Message

Movember raises awareness of men's health

The worldwide Movember initiative campaigns for men's health every November.

The name Movember is a combination of the English words "moustache" and "November". The campaign aims to raise awareness of men's health, particularly prostate and testicular cancer as well as men's mental health.

To draw attention to these issues, participants grow a moustache during November or get involved through various activities and fundraising events.

One well-known challenge is the 60-kilometre challenge. Participants attempt to cover a total distance of 60 kilometres over the course of the month.

The number symbolises the approximately 60 men who die by suicide every hour around the world.

As part of the initiative, a charity meal will take place in Alcoy on 21 November at 2 pm.

For more information and to register for the meal, visit:

es.movember.com/events/view/id/mq90

Further information about the campaign and ways to get involved can be found at:

de.movember.com/support-us/grow

Mabs – Volunteers wanted

The Mabs organisation is looking for volunteers to help with transport services and its visiting and companionship programme.

Anyone interested can contact Irena Bodnarec:

Telephone: 634 374 754
Email: cbcoordinator@mabscancerfoundation.org
Website: mabscancerfoundation.org

Mabs is also organising the following events:

- **Christmas Fayre:** 15 November, 10:30 am–2:30 pm at Bomba 8, Jávea harbour.
- **Lunar Walk:** 24 November at 6 pm in Jávea.

An overview of current charity runs is available at www.carreraslevante.com.

All dates for the RunCáncer series can be found at www.runcancer.com.