



A « Wig Bank »

for the oncology department of a hospital in rural Chile

Today's multi-billion dollar hair industry, including hair dyes, styling products, wigs, celebrity hair-dressers and hairstyle magazines successfully fuel the idea that the state of our hair is an essential element in our self-esteem. But this is not a new concept: throughout history, and in fairy tales and legends, a woman's hair has been seen as a manifestation of her femininity and desirability – her “crowning glory”.

Given the incidence of cancer in the western world, and particularly in Belgium, we in the Association Femmes d'Europe have all have either experienced breast or other cancers, or have close friends or family who have done so. Fortunately, the survival rate is high, and constantly improving, thanks inter alia to chemotherapy and other treatments. But the side-effects of chemotherapy, and in particular the loss of our hair can be devastating. To look in the mirror and see a bald head is to be confronted with oneself as a cancer patient – or worse, a cancer victim; whereas ideally cancer is an illness to be cured, and not the definition of a person.



The psychological effects of losing one's hair through chemotherapy have long been recognized as a major source of additional stress – as if the illness itself were not enough! And the solution is, of course, to buy yourself the best wig you can afford. Obviously, the same psychological trauma is suffered throughout the world, but in poorer regions, most women cannot afford a wig.



One of our members has close contact with an underfunded rural hospital in Chile, where the patients are almost all poor, and struggling to feed their families. Since 2016 the hospital has an oncology service, and has treated some 400 patients with chemotherapy. Many are women who have lost their hair and have consequently suffered emotional and social trauma, and a total loss of self-esteem.

A group of the personnel working with the oncology service (social assistants, psychotherapists and others) was inspired to create a “wig bank”, to help the women who could not afford to buy a wig. They located a supplier of high quality, natural hair wigs, who undertook to carry out all necessary maintenance of the wigs between users. They established the criteria to select the women who could benefit from the system. Beneficiaries sign a contract undertaking to care for the wigs, according to instructions given, for the approximately six months during which they have the use of a wig.

And then they obtained funding from FdE to buy 19 excellent wigs.



The empathy we feel with all women who lose their hair through chemotherapy was a major reason why this project appealed to our Association. The result, according to the hospital Director, has been a significant improvement in the self-esteem, confidence and quality of life of the patients benefitting from the use of the wigs.

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