

## **Emel Murat**

*When Emel was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2001, she found it hard to understand her diagnosis and make informed choices about her treatment. Here, she talks about how the cancer taboos within her Turkish speaking community affected her and how she is now determined to ensure that everyone is breast aware.*

“When my husband felt a lump, breast cancer didn’t even cross my mind. I am susceptible to cysts and so I thought nothing of it. I was busy working and running a home and had never felt better, so I decided to ignore it and get on with things as normal.

Seven months later, the lump was still there and had increased in size. My husband mentioned it to me again and so I decided to visit my GP.

I was referred to a specialist at our local hospital and they asked about any family cancer history. My sister had died at the age of 26 but her illness was never discussed in detail. Cancer is a taboo subject in the Turkish speaking community, but I thought she had died of pancreatic cancer.

I had a series of tests and then had the lump removed for a firm diagnosis. I returned to the hospital with my husband. I can remember it as if it were yesterday. The results confirmed I had breast cancer. I was shaking with shock, adamant that they must have got this wrong. I was fit and healthy, how could it be?

I was sent home with some information, but it was not particularly useful and I did not understand my options.

I was unhappy and felt I needed to understand what was going to happen to my body. I didn’t want chemotherapy and I didn’t want to lose my breast. My breast care nurse, aware of my anxiety, pointed out that I was entitled to a second opinion.

A colleague put me in touch with a woman in our community who had been diagnosed recently. I thought this may help, but whilst on the phone to her, I could hear that she found the topic of conversation difficult and I found this hard to deal with. So I spoke to another colleague who was able to recommend where I could go for a second opinion and more information.

This was a real turning point. The consultant went through everything all over again and explained the reasons behind his recommendations. I had faith in him and trusted his judgement. To my husband’s relief, I began chemotherapy.

My treatment had a huge impact on me but I tried to get on with things. My attitude was that the sooner it was over, the quicker I would be able to get on with my life. During this time, I felt that I was alone on this difficult journey and that there was really no one to talk to for guidance. So my husband contacted the organiser of a local support group and put me in touch. It felt as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders that someone understood what I had been going through and it was here that I received information about Breast Cancer Care Services

In 2003, I unexpectedly received a telephone call asking whether I would be interested in becoming involved in a cancer support group for the Turkish speaking Community. I wanted to do something to offer others more help during their diagnosis and treatment, so I willingly agreed to take part.

I went along to the volunteer meeting of our self-funding charity, The Pro Cancer Research Fund Support Group and have been involved ever since.

We have received excellent feedback from the Turkish speaking community about our charity. Those facing cancer can now get the support and information they need, communicated to them in their own language, whilst understanding the cultural issues facing them. I am so

proud to be associated with this. There is still such a fear of even saying the word 'cancer' and as a Muslim you are raised not to look at or touch your own body. I have discussed this with my daughter and she is now much more aware of the need to educate herself on the risks. There are still a lot of challenges that need to be overcome but we are working hard to bring equality in cancer care to a community that has been silent and invisible until we came along. There is little or no cancer information in Turkish and we are working hard to change this and are hoping to work in partnership with other charities to make sure that we right this wrong.

Our charity is hoping to work closely with Breast Cancer Care, who will hopefully help us to get our voice heard. They are campaigning to ensure that all communities in the UK can access their services and understand the risks of breast cancer and we are proud to be working alongside them to reach the Turkish speaking community.

I went along to the Fashion Show last year as a guest and was so moved by the whole experience. I felt that I would love to have an opportunity to send out such a positive message and represent Turkish speaking women. And here I am!

Through being involved with our own charity and Breast Cancer Care, my life has become enriched. I have been lucky enough to meet some amazing people who are all dedicated to ensuring that breast cancer is understood in all communities. There is still much work to be done but I strongly believe that awareness saves lives.”

Interviewed by Hilary Blackburn  
Photography by Peter G Wells