



International Congress
BREAST: FROM RECONSTRUCTION TO REGENERATION
Vila Vipolže, 16 February 2026

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Opening address to the International Congress on Breast Cancer and Post-Cancer Breast Reconstruction

Distinguished professors, dear colleagues and friends, good morning and welcome to the International Meeting – Breast: from Reconstruction to Regeneration.

It is my honour and privilege to have the opportunity to greet an eminent group of experts in breast reconstruction after cancer surgery, so allow me to list just a few Slovenian names: Prof. Arnež – as a pioneer in this field, Prof. Ahčan – a true magician, I have yet to read his new book Scalpel, then there are the young generations here, Dr. Oblak, Dr. Zavrtanik, Dr. Humar, the very experienced Dr. Nataša Fikfak, and so on!

My first encounter with breast cancer dates back to the late 1970s, when I worked at the diagnostic laboratory of the Oncology Institute in Zagreb. We performed up to 10,000 punctures for suspected breast cancer per year, not only for Croatian women, but for the whole of Bosnia and for at least half of Slovenia.

In the early 1980s, I left the Oncology Institute and came to Slovenia to specialize in Public Health, which is a field I have been working in ever since. In the eighties, my colleagues and mentors established the regional association for the Fight against Cancer – Društvo ko-RAK.si. Especially throughout the 1990s, the regional association worked intensively on alleviating the consequences of breast cancer, under the leadership of the late Dr. Metka Jug Rus.

The situation at that time was as follows:



- until the turn of the millennium, survival rates of breast cancer were relatively poor, especially for metastatic cancers,
- cancer was treated with chemotherapy, radiation and surgery;
- all of these therapies left severe and long-lasting consequences for women, including disability. Women were severely affected not only medically, but also psychologically and socially. Surgical interventions caused severe mutilation, and many women felt like an important aspect of the female self was taken away from them;
- at that time, cancer treatment had one single goal - to prolong survival as much as possible. This means that any issues concerning a patient's quality of life and the preservation of her breasts were in fact subordinate issues.

Since then, different NGO's have fought for comprehensive treatment options, for the quality of life, and different kinds of support for patients. We have been working on this constantly: through education, advocacy and empowerment, through providing regular exercise sessions to help with lymphedema, and psychosocial support.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women. In Slovenia, there are around 1,500 cases per year, which is why the mortality rate is also quite high – every year, around 400 Slovenian women die of breast cancer.

Today, the 5-year survival rate for breast cancer is over 86%, which is a great improvement.

This is possible due to the development of the entire field of oncology – major changes for the better have occurred in the last 30 years.

New drugs have been developed, especially targeted drugs and immunotherapy, radiation has become even more precise, and the development of surgery means that operations have become minimally invasive. Indeed, we can say that the situation in the field of breast cancer treatment has completely changed.

Thanks to the screening programs and the improvement of all forms of treatment, breast cancer has become one of the most curable cancers.

This means that today we no longer focus on survival only. We can now also think about the quality of life of cancer patients during and after their diagnosis. This is where the wonderful story of reconstructive surgery comes in.

Today, surgical breast reconstruction after the removal of cancerous tissue and mastectomies is an integral part of the comprehensive treatment of breast cancer. Plastic surgeons play an extremely important role in ensuring the quality of life of patients. You truly are artists – after cancer takes away so much, you are the ones who give women back one of the key factors of life: femininity, including self-confidence, a positive self-image and feeling good and safe in their bodies.

We can be proud and grateful that we live in a country that allows all of this within the basic health rights of every woman who wants and needs it.

As the president of the regional association for the fight against cancer Društvo ko-RAK.si, which has been providing support to breast cancer patients for many years, I consider it an honour to be able to participate in this important and top-notch scientific meeting.

Dear organizing committee, thank you for the invitation and for organizing such a spectacular international congress.

I wish everyone a nice day and successful work.

Dr Marko Vudrag