



## **Impact of Breast Cancer on Employment**

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Breast cancer is the most common cancer among women. It is estimated that 7500 new cases are detected every year in Belgium. Over the past few decades, improvements in detection and treatment methods have made it possible to deal with the disease at an early stage and to monitor younger women, of working age. This phenomenon, observed in all developed countries, causes us to wonder how breast cancer affects the working lives of such women. Do they have the same employment trajectories, in terms of working hours, wages and occupation, as women who have similar profiles but have not suffered breast cancer? This question leads to a more fundamental issue: namely what action the public authorities could take to help women affected by breast cancer return to work. Whereas scientific research over the past thirty years has above all related to screening and treatment, we now think it important to look in addition at issues connected with quality of life - and that includes the return to work.

Our aim is therefore to study the impact of breast cancer on women's working lives and to determine whether or not this disease has an influence on quality of work. In order to do so, we intend to measure two effects. The first measurement relates to the effects of breast cancer on the labour supply: do women who are physically and psychologically affected by the disease wish to end their career (early retirement or quite simply giving up work), reduce their working hours (part-time) or change jobs (less arduous work)? The second measurement concerns the effects of breast cancer on the demand for labour: do discriminatory attitudes exist among employers (dismissal, redeployment, early retirement) due to their fears about the productivity of sick workers (absences, relapses, fatigue, loss of motivation, etc.)?

In order to study the impact of breast cancer on patients' subsequent employment, we shall define attitudes to employment between 6 and 12 months after diagnosis, on the basis of a pilot study conducted at the Saint Pierre CHU (teaching hospital) in Brussels. In this way we shall analyse the influence of three types of variable (socio-economic, psychological and medical) on the return to work (multinomial logit to test the impact of the different variables on the situation after 6 to 12 months).

The preliminary findings are interesting and reveal a degree of disquiet.

Of the 249 women (63%) working when diagnosed with breast cancer, 113 (45%) of them say that they experienced changes in their working lives as a result of the disease. These changes took the form of either stopping work completely or requesting early retirement (58%), linked in some cases with serious problems of depression and anxiety, or else a reduction in working hours, a sideways move or a change of job (42%). In the latter cases, the decision was often taken following physical problems caused by the breast surgery (being forbidden to, or warned not to, make certain movements: avoiding repetitive movements, no longer carrying heavy loads on the side of the operated arm, etc.). We would also point out that, of the 113 women who experienced changes in their working lives, 18 of them were aged under 40 and 52 were under 50, i.e. two women out of three encountered difficulties while in the prime of their working lives. Moreover, those women who underwent extensive treatment (chemotherapy and radiotherapy) experienced more work-related problems than women who underwent only radiotherapy or no treatment at all. Physically, such patients are without doubt capable of resuming work, but psychologically, they are totally unable to do so. This pilot study reveals the existence of significant work-related consequences for almost half (45%) of the women with breast cancer who were in work before their disease was diagnosed.