



## INDIA ALLIANCE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT EVENT

# 'Voices For Cancer'

Panel discussion at Miranda House, University of Delhi  
Feb 17, 2015

Cancer is a leading cause of deaths in India and its incidence is likely to rise five-fold by 2025 [World Health Organization]. With such a grim future, health communicators and the media become crucial for disseminating important cancer prevention and treatment information to the public. Many cancers are treatable if diagnosed early and thus awareness is important to reduce the burden and stigma attached to it.

'Voices for Cancer' [panel discussion](#) held at Miranda House, Delhi, on February 17, 2015, was organised with the aim to inform and encourage students to play a role in cancer prevention- to discuss how we can bridge the gap between the public and their access to key health information on cancer, how effective communication and public engagement can remove the stigma attached to it and finally, how different stakeholders and most importantly the public (the students!) could play an important role in cancer prevention.

The diverse panel comprised of Dinesh Sharma (Science author and columnist), Dr Kanchan Kaur (Breast Cancer specialist, Medanta), Rita Bhalla (Indian Cancer Society), young and inspirational cancer survivors, Chandan Kumar and Ritu Bhalla who work at [Cankids](#) and an upbeat mother of a brave cancer survivor, Priti Sayeed. A range of issues related to cancer risk perception and prevention were deliberated at this event with personal anecdotes of Priti Sayeed, Chandan Kumar and Ritu Bhalla forming the perfect backdrop for discussions.

Priti Sayeed shared her experiences of being a mother of a cancer patient and the inspiring story of how her daughter overcame cancer by baking (and selling) cupcakes and most importantly with a positive spirit. She felt that cancer should be perceived like any other disease and the term cancer 'survivor' needs to give way to a more appropriate word. Both Chandan Kumar and Ritu Bhalla, recounted stories of discrimination and stigma they faced and brought to notice how health/life insurance companies outright deny insurance to cancer survivors. Together, Dr Kanchan Kaur and Rita Bhalla stressed the importance for prioritizing health by women in India and that

regular health checkups ought to become an important part of their daily lives. Suneeta Krishnan, an epidemiologist from RTI International, encouraged young women to take information on cancer to their mothers, aunts and friends to promote early detection. Dr Kanchan Kaur described instances of how misinformation and 'Dr Google' had skewed the cancer risk perceptions, giving rise to people avoiding visits to doctors for medical advice and help which eventually leads to incorrect self-diagnosis and delayed treatment. Dinesh Sharma was of the opinion that even though perceptions about cancer are changing in India, cultural beliefs and myths still dominate, partly due to lack of accurate and good quality health information that journalists and the public in general ought to receive from health practitioners and researchers. A majority student audience asked questions ranging from, information on cancer screening, family support for cancer patients, risk factors to biology of cancers and how they (the students!) could be the change agent towards a cancer-free healthier tomorrow. Some serious issues were raised through this discussion concerning cancer awareness in India, and tangible and useful solutions were offered. On the whole, the panel and the audience collectively felt the importance of recognising cancer as a wide-spread but treatable disease if detected at an early stage and that all the stakeholders have to come together to tackle the challenges currently facing cancer prevention in India.

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the panelists for an engaging and informative discussion, Suneeta Krishna and Ritu Sinha of RTI International, Preet Kohli from PHFI and Bilasini Norem, Rekha, Pradeep Mohanty and Supriya Pranay of Miranda House for joining hands to organise this event.