

'My motto is to not waste a day your cancer treatment gives you'

Ann McBrien has become one of Northern Ireland's most tireless campaigners for breast cancer as she navigates her own health journey



Ann during treatment

Una Carlin

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Ann McBrien's breast cancer was caught and treated early. Five years later, it returned and the diagnosis was terminal.

The Belfast woman (63), married to Joe, was diagnosed with primary breast cancer in 2013 following her first mammogram. The lesion was minuscule but led to a breast-conserving lumpectomy, radiotherapy and she was prescribed endocrine therapy for five years.

Discharged from Cancer Services and assumed cured and cancer-free, just two months later she ~~was~~ given the devastating news, she had Stage 4, incurable metastatic breast cancer which had spread to her lungs.



Ann and husband Joe © Jonathan Jones

Not only has Ann lived beyond the average life expectancy of between two and five years, but the retired NHS accountant has also become one of Northern Ireland's most tireless campaigners, working voluntarily as a patient advocate to improve cancer research, cancer services and cancer outcomes.

So prolific is her work, in September she was awarded a British Empire Medal (BEM) in the Kings Honours list for helping women living with the disease.

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Ann sits as a patient representative on a number of strategic and clinical groups, including the Department of Health Cancer Steering Group, Department of Health Breast Review Programme Board, Department of Health Breast Service User Forum, the Northern Ireland Breast Clinical Studies Group — leading the NI clinical trials portfolio, and the Northern Ireland Breast Clinical Reference Group — all breast clinical experts operating across NI.



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She is also the NI representative for METUPUK; a UK patient-led, charity-focused on driving change for people living with metastatic breast cancer, and an ambassador for the 5K Your Way; a UK charity promoting the benefits of movement for cancer patients.



Ann at Honours ceremony last week at Hillsborough Castle. with Professor Sir Michael McBride

All while living with aggressive breast cancer, the continuous cycles of treatment every three weeks at the NI Cancer Centre, and debilitating side effects. Ann has just completed her 120th cycle.

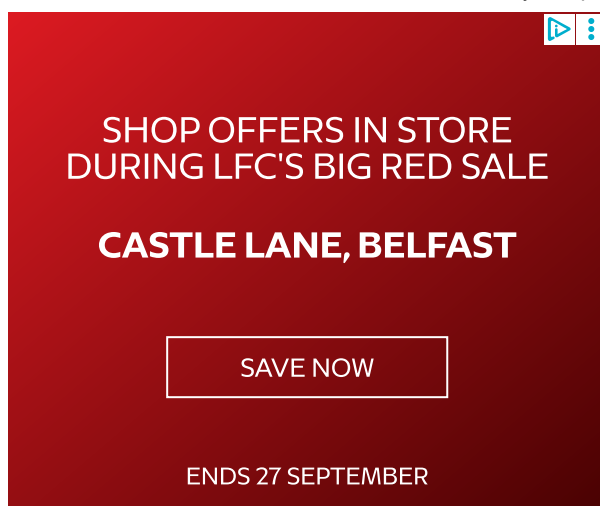
Ann said: "I got involved in cancer research and patient advocacy soon after my Stage 4 diagnosis. I wanted to do something to help others, make improvements in cancer services and improve outcomes for people diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer.

"It was a complete shock as my original cancer had been detected early through the screening programme. I had clear mammograms over this five-year surveillance period, and had complied with endocrine therapy, despite difficult side effects.



Ann at home © Jonathan Jones

“I was over the moon to be discharged from Cancer Services and get on with life, but just two months after, I was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer by my GP, following an MRI for shoulder pain and was referred straight back. It was devastating and completely changed every aspect of my world.”



Ann is one of three women diagnosed with breast cancer speaking on Friday (October 9) at the Breast Cancer Information Day at QUB, as part of Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

Listening to her story, will be some of NI's leading researchers and medical experts, including Professor Sir Michael McBride, Chief Medical Officer, Professor Alan Smyth, Dean and Head of QUB's School of Medicine and Dr Joanne McClean, Director of Public Health, among others.

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It is being hosted by the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry, which is part of the Centre for Public Health (CPH) at Queen's University Belfast and funded by the Public Health Agency. It produces official statistics on cancer incidence, prevalence and survival in NI and guides decisions about cancer services. The theme of this symposium is inequality.

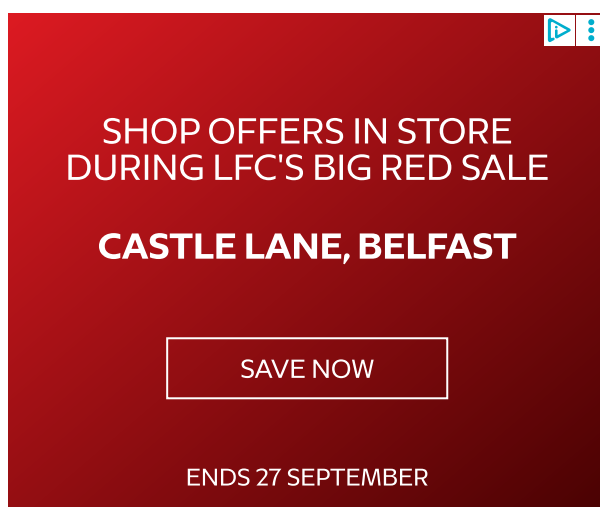
Ann said: "I got involved with the NI Cancer Registry through my membership of the Northern Ireland Cancer Research Consumer Forum. The entire Registry team have been exceptionally open and welcoming to me as a patient. I am an integral part of the research team and feel my contributions are valued. I am heavily involved as a patient researcher and proud to be a co-author of all the breast cancer research studies being showcased at today's event.



Ann at ESMO

“The research I am most proud of is the production of estimates of incidence and prevalence of metastatic breast cancer in Northern Ireland. I campaigned relentlessly for the Department of

Health to be involved in the metastatic breast cancer data audit carried out in England and Wales. I did not want NI patients to be left behind. Whilst some changes were made to the final NI Cancer Strategy in respect of data for metastatic disease, involvement in the national audits was not brought forward. However, I continued dialogue with Cancer Focus NI, who agreed to fund the research carried out by the NI Cancer Registry.



“That work is groundbreaking, with NI being among one of the first countries in the world to have this data. This achievement has been recognised globally — and the charity, Breast Cancer Now, has awarded Queen’s University and the NI Cancer Registry a grant of almost £400k to do further research into this area.”

Describing her own patient pathway ‘as excellent,’ Ann has also successfully campaigned for the development of a metastatic breast cancer patient pathway with the Department for Health.

Dr Damien Bennett, Director of the NICR, said: “We can’t thank Ann enough for her work and patient advocacy. Today’s event will also include research updates on breast cancer inequalities among primary breast cancer patients, current and future work on secondary metastatic breast cancer and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on patient pathways. This helps build a fuller picture on how the disease is impacting upon people in NI. We’ll also be updating on a £383,600 recently funded research project by Breast Cancer Now led by Dr Charlene McShane (CPH) to examine inequalities in metastatic breast cancer patients.

Advising others facing a cancer diagnosis, Ann said: “It is very difficult as you are living with uncertainty, so my advice would be to try to gain some control in an uncontrollable situation. Inform yourself about your disease, advocate for yourself, develop a partnership with your oncologist and try to live every day to the best of your ability. My motto is to not waste a day your cancer treatment gives you. For now, I’m grateful to be alive and beating the statistics.”

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