

## Dragon paddlers make a splash



Consultant surgeon Dr Constantino Castineira who is a passionate supporter of dragon boating.

Waterford Dragon Warriors took to the river on Friday last for their maiden paddle aboard their dragon boat.

The group of ladies, comprised of those who have been diagnosed with breast cancer, departed from the boat club pontoon for their exciting voyage which saw them travel along a section of the River Suir.

Breast cancer is unfortunately one of the most common cancers in Ireland, with more than 2,000 women diagnosed each year.

However, the prognosis is thankfully much more positive than in previous years thanks to major advances in cancer care.

Life after a breast cancer diagnosis can also be much more positive nowadays, as the Waterford Dragon Warriors have proven.

Friday represented a special occasion for all of those who have been involved in establishing the Waterford Dragon Warriors.

One man who has supported the ladies in their endeavours since day one is consultant surgeon Dr Constantio Castinera.

From South Tipperary General Hospital in Clonmel and Waterford Regional Hospital (WRH), he has worked closely with local women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer.

He has keenly supported those who wanted to become involved in dragon boating and has presented it as a viable option for the recovery process.

Ahead of the Waterford Dragon Warriors' maiden voyage, I sat down with Dr Castinera, who is originally from Galicia in Spain, to discuss the dragon boating phenomenon.

He explained how he first became involved in dragon boating.

"I saw a note in a newsletter from Europa Donna, which is the advocacy group for breast cancer. I read about a dragon boat team and thought it was a fantastic idea," he explained.

"In 2012, I went to a regatta in Dublin and sought more information about dragon boating. I decided to work on establishing something similar in the South East."

Dr Castinera contacted cancer support services in Clonmel and Waterford.

He initially focused his efforts on establishing dragon boating in Clonmel as he lives in the town and is a member of the local rowing club.

"I knew the river and the people in the rowing club and the people in the cancer support centre in Clonmel. We all thought it was a great idea to work on and help people who have been through cancer," he said.

He worked closely with Catherine Phelan who established the Waterford Regional and South Tipperary Hospital Breast Cancer Support Group shortly after she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2007.

One of the main objectives of Catherine's group was to purchase a dragon boat, something which required significant fundraising efforts.

The first dragon boat arrived in Clonmel in March 2013.

But exactly what is dragon boating?

The first dragon boat team was founded in 1996 in Canada, inspired by the research of sports medicine specialist Dr Don McKenzie.

"For many years we have been afraid of people who have lymphedema exercising in case they injure themselves. Dr McKenzie found that not only was exercise not detrimental but it was in fact beneficial," explained Dr Castinera.

“Upper body exercise is very good to help recover damage caused by cancer and the side effects of the surgery,” he added.

The popularity of dragon boating has now spread worldwide.

However, the benefits of dragon boating are not just physical.

“When patients that have cancer are going through the hospital they have a huge amount of support between the surgeons, breast cancer nurses etc. Then they’re told things are ok and out they go. We see that many of them basically collapse. There is a loss of control and confidence in who they are as a person,” said Dr Castinera.

He continued: “When you enter one of these teams you are surrounded by people who you don’t need to explain anything to. There is comradeship and support between each other. The idea is to have fun and get back to leading a normal life.”

Dr Castinera believes exercise is crucial to help prevent a reoccurrence of cancer.

“There are a number of cancers that can be decreased by exercising. The rate of reoccurrence can be decreased significantly by exercising,” he said.

“With some cancers, with moderate to strenuous exercise on a continuous basis, you can decrease the risk of reoccurrence by up to 50 per cent. That is incredible. That’s the same as can be achieved with some of the best drugs that we have in the market.”

He added: “You should wait three months after the last treatment to get involved in dragon boating but you can do gentle exercises in the meantime. A minimum of six weeks of exercising before joining the team is required to help with strength and mobility. Dragon boating is not for everybody. There are other people that love to go swimming, walking or cycling instead. The important thing is that they do some sort of exercise.”

Cancer in general is increasing in Ireland, as Dr Castinera explained.

“Since 2008, the increase in cancer has been 16.8 per cent. The national cancer control programme estimates that by 2020 the number of cancers in Ireland will double,” he said.

“It’s a very serious issue. But we will see more and more people living with cancer because treatments are improving. Experts are saying that cancer will hopefully become like a chronic disease.”

“Once you are diagnosed with cancer, life is not the same again. But at least we can try to ensure that everyone in the household which is affected can see that Mam, or whoever has cancer, is a normal person who goes out and enjoys herself with her friends. It’s a very challenging time for the person to go through the treatment and diagnosis, receiving the news and telling people at home, but dragon boating proves that there are positive things which can be done afterwards.”

Dr Castinera paid tribute to all the members of the Suir Dragon Paddlers in Clonmel and the Waterford Dragon Warriors.

"I hope to continue supporting and helping with the coaching," he said.

He is encouraging more people to find out about dragon boating and to get involved.

For more information check out the Waterford Dragon Warriors Facebook page and visit [www.dragonboat.ie](http://www.dragonboat.ie)