Correspondence

The art of prevention and advocacy: A virtual art exhibition for the European Week Against Cancer amid the pandemic

1. Introduction

The last week of May marks the European Week Against Cancer (EWAC). The celebration brings together cancer charities, civil society, policy-makers and the general public to raise awareness about cancer prevention and care, while promoting patients and survivors rights, equal access to cancer treatment and the empowerment of patients and survivors [1].

The EWAC is a campaign of the Association of European Cancer Leagues (ECL), whose Youth Ambassadors (YAs) taskforce consists of more than 75 volunteer young people from different disciplines and more than 30 different countries. A wide variety of events, from scientific conferences to offline and online marathons has been organized so far [2]. In 2019, the EWAC art exhibition was inaugurated in a semi-online format hosted at the Medical Museum of the University of Crete in Greece. A report of its outcomes was published by WHO Europe in the Public Health Panorama Journal [3], while the next edition of the exhibition coincided with the global pandemic. Instead of postponing the activity, we decided to move forward in the virtual realm.

2. Procedures and logistics of the exhibition

While exploring the virtual environment of Artsteps, we took some steps to make the exhibition more inclusive, maintaining the focus on healthcare students and workers. To ensure transparency and maximize accessibility, we released a detailed call for participation explaining the exhibition procedure, the aims of the EWAC and clarifying copyright and personal data issues. All forms of visual art were accepted as long as there was no violation of copyright and confidentiality standards. Young people of the WHO Europe region from 18 to 35 years old, according to the EU framework of youth participation were eligible to participate.

Ambassadors of Greece, Turkey and North Macedonia translated the call in their native languages. The call was distributed through the social media channels of the ECL, the mail lists of the involved ambassadors’ universities and circulated among student scientific associations or youth workers’ websites willing to promote it on a pro bono basis.

The participants would submit their artwork in digital format along with their affiliation and an explanatory text. Opening the call to everyone involved in the sector of healthcare, instead of solely medical students, brought submissions from students and young professionals in medicine, pharmacy, social work, biology and other disciplines. Within three weeks, we received 18 artworks, physical (scanned copies) and digital paintings, from 8 countries (Ukraine, Greece, Romania, France, Slovakia, Turkey, Serbia and Malta), out of whom 70% came from medical students and the rest from junior doctors, dentistry, physiology, biochemistry and social work students. Samples of this work can be found in Fig. 1, which also depicts the digital design of the exhibition.

3. Impact of the exhibition

On the first day of the EWAC, the exhibition that was prepared in the free edition of the Artsteps platform (Dataverse Ltd, Athens, Greece) was made publicly available and was promoted on ECL’s website and social media. It was also featured by the European Student Think Tank, a European NGO with a readership of 25,000k followers on Facebook, LinkedIn and other platforms. The exhibition has received 1100 visits during the EWAC and 1400 visits so far, ranking high among other exhibitions hosted in the same platform for a similar amount of time [https://www.artsteps.com/view/5ec9b1f15a5444228d52b582] (Fig. 1).

In terms of content, the exhibition addressed various aspects of cancer from prevention, to disease burden and therapeutics. The explanatory remarks made the message of each artwork clear and were easily accessible in the format of the exhibition. Apart from the artworks, infographics of the European Code Against Cancer, a compilation of recommendation issued by the WHO - IARC and the European Commission to decrease individual cancer risk in the WHO Europe region, were displayed [3].

Overall, the EWAC exhibition appeared established on evidence and innovative according to the feedback we received from partners, participants and visitors. Published research has suggested that the use of art in such a context has a positive twofold rational impact making people more knowledgeable and engaged or empathetic [3]. The purpose of the ECAC and the EWAC is to inform and motivate people to reduce their cancer risk. With an exhibition addressing the matter from both a cognitive and sentimental viewpoint, we have been in line with this goal.

Moreover, while most relevant events would be canceled due to the pandemic, switching to a virtual format allowed us to convey the message of cancer prevention. The visibility of the EWAC2019 exhibition was limited to the visitors of the Museum and the community of the University. On the contrary, the EWAC2020 exhibition was accessible to any individual during and after the EWAC. The ECL’s social media strategy and the outreach of the EST maximized the number of people who were able to access the artworks and benefit from the displayed information. What is more, this format required minimal resources and had a slight carbon footprint, taking into account that no transportation or shipping was required.

Our claim of innovation is supported by the positive impact of the exhibition both in terms of content and format within a short time after the EWAC. In terms of content and participation, we received numerous communications from students, academic staff and physicians inquiring about the ECAC. Moreover, two groups of ambassadors started working
on two policy papers to assess the impact of the pandemic on cancer prevention and access to medicines, based on the assumption that the exhibition would be a reminder of cancer prevention recommendations that get neglected during the pandemic. On top of these, the exhibition was a chance for the participants to network and establish collaboration.

In terms of format, an art exhibition regarding the Stem Cells Awareness Week was organized in November 2020 following the EWAC’s exhibition format [4]. Furthermore, a group of students who got to know Artsteps through this exhibition used the same platform and features in a hackathon supported by EIT Health and were able to secure the first position [5]. Their display of a telemedical rehabilitation program was quite straightforward towards the jury of the hackathon. Although the content was different, it became evident that this format was an effective tool of communication-related to critical aspects of health.

4. Conclusion

Certainly, the EWAC2020 exhibition met inherent and non-inherent limitations such as our limited experience with the platform and especially its 3D features and the low level of familiarization of elder people including physicians and academics with this technology. In the future, we can divide the exhibition into rooms - thematic sections or organize satellite section specific exhibitions throughout the year. Apart from inviting people to visit the exhibition, we can also host live-streaming sessions screen sharing the exhibition and explaining the relevance of their artworks to the ECAC. The format of the exhibition can also be extrapolated in the ECAC workshops, with participants invited to navigate in rooms featuring tasks related to the artworks. In collaboration with the ambassadors’ or the participants’ universities, we may also attempt to organize teaching sessions about cancer prevention and therapeutics taking incentives from the exhibited artworks.

Ethical approval

No animals, human subjects or sensitive data were used in this study. Hence, acquiring an IRB was not deemed appropriate.

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Guarantor

Christos Tsagkaris.

Consent

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Declaration of competing interest

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