

Institutional Gender Discrimination Towards Men With Breast Cancer



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Having edited nearly 100 patient stories for the Male Breast Cancer Coalition's survivor stories series, I'm in a position to understand some of the hurdles men have to overcome when going through diagnosis and treatment for this disease.

Most of these tales are not a reflection on health professionals, rather on institutionalized biases that mirror public perceptions that are reinforced through public education programs, and by pink charities neglecting to point out that around one per cent of new cases occur in men.

Personally, I'm quick to point out that my breast friends are predominately women. Of course they are. In fact, I have so many women supporting me that I truly understand, these women just get it. And the very many men I know with this disease are really bonded. A greeting is inevitably accompanied by a lift of the shirt to compare scars!

But, de-gendering of this disease is long overdue, along with an end to the casual sexism that is pretty well institutionalized, if men are to be given a fair go dealing with breast cancer. On a basic level, it can be as simple as offering an alternative to the pink gowns provided for men undergoing tests and treatments.

Men's comments include:

"My wife was often the one assumed to be the patient."

"People looked at me strangely in the waiting room as I stood up and walked towards the office door when my name was called for the mammogram."

"There at the 'women's health center', I discovered my first impressions of bias and de-masculinization. Questions asked about my menstrual cycle, and strange looks from other patients."

"The Cancer Society hardly ever addresses the issue of male breast cancer in its communications with the public."

"My family doctor set me up an appointment with the breast clinic for an ultrasound. They looked it over and said it was gynecomastia and nothing to worry about, but we should monitor it."

"My 'doctor' told me to wait. In spite of the fact my father had breast cancer and my sister had ovarian cancer, he told me to wait!"

"I chuckle at the instructions included with my appointment notices, 'please wear a two-piece outfit and notify us if you are menstruating.'"

"I am not a hero, but a man who wants the world to know that women aren't the only ones affected by this disease and we shouldn't be embarrassed to have it or talk about it."

Pinktober sets us back

October each year is a bad time for breast cancer survivors, especially men, since the trivialization and sexualization of the disease by well-meaning groups and the commercial exploitation of the pink dollar by some companies has reached unacceptable heights. What started as a month of awareness-raising has developed into an exercise in pink washing that obscures the true extent of the processes used in treating the cancer, leads men to believe that it is exclusively a women's disease, and obscures the fact that there is no cure for breast cancer.

"I was diagnosed in October, and I realized it was breast cancer awareness month, yet no one talked about men. I thought if I start a men's breast cancer survivor group it would be me and another guy. Men's breast cancer should be talked about and featured right alongside female breast cancer. During the month of October, men should be included in all awareness campaigns."

Because breast cancer groups are mostly fixated on using pink to denote breast cancer, the community is not aware that males get the disease as well.

A time for institutional change

- Reduce the sexual stereotyping of breast cancer as being exclusively a female disease.
- Include a splash of blue among the pink to raise awareness of male breast cancer.
- Institute a day in October to publicize male breast cancer.
- Advocate for one percent of funds raised on research for male breast cancer.
- Advocate for a screening program for men with an hereditary predisposition to breast cancer.
- Provide inclusive imagery and language across all mediums to acknowledge the disease exists in men.
- Build a sense of importance and belonging within cancer support groups for male breast cancer patients and their caregivers.
- Provide easy access to relevant up-to-date information for men that is prominently displayed and accessible by all groups.
- Promote breast cancer research and development funding programs that include the male experience.



"It is still hard for men to tell their stories of their journey and how they have come to understand it and live with it. It is important for young boys and men to understand that it is not something to be ashamed of. It is part of life and something that has to be dealt with in a timely manner because breast cancer is definitely a killer of men and women!"

Let's move forward

I don't think anyone or any organization purposely leaves men out the breast cancer awareness, diagnosis, or the treatment equation. It just happens because not enough fuss has been raised over the topic. However, change for the better may be on the way. Already some breast cancer organizations are de-gendering the text on their websites, research institutions are heeding the call, and including more men in studies and trials. Slowly, slowly, men are starting to appear as more visible in promotional imagery, they are being made to feel welcome as patients, and they are shedding the embarrassment that they feel as men with what has been primarily promoted as a women's disease. The recent FDA call for men to be included in trials will be a great leap forward, hugely liberating, and important in that future treatments may well be tailored to our specific needs.

This October, ask your local pink charity to include men in their promotions and raise true awareness of the genderless nature of breast cancer, because men don't deserve a later diagnosis and a poorer prognosis.

We deserve equality.