

SEARCH

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Helen Cordes

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Rethink Pink NOW! Sane Solutions To Breast Cancer

What's Your Reaction?

[Part 1 of 2]

One in eight. Such is the stark stat about an American woman's chance of a breast cancer diagnosis, and it's a constant backbeat to a pink whirlwind of walks, runs, and loads of pink purchases this month, which marks the 25th anniversary of October's National Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

Too bad it's a lie.

Yesterday, the American Cancer Society (ACS) finally admitted that many women are diagnosed and treated for breast cancer needlessly--that the "cancer" they have is in fact nothing that would spread or ever kill them or even be noticed without mammograms. Check out particulars here. Oh, and by the way, says ACS (one of the loudest of the "get-a-regular-mammogram-or-you'll-die breast cancer establishment voices), mammograms don't necessarily catch bad cancers either.

On the positive side, this means that the one-in-eight odds are actually somewhat better. On the down side, it's inexcusable that this ACS admission was so long in the making. Although ACS' chief medical officer told the *New York Times* that "we never sat back and actually thought, 'Are we treating the cancers that need to be treated?'" , lots of others weren't so seemingly out of the loop. Breast cancer over-diagnosis and mammogram risks have in fact been actively debated for decades, particularly by women's health activists, and got much notice just a few months ago with studies showing an estimated one-in-three overtreatment rate among women tracked in Canada, Europe, the US, and Australia. Ditto for data about mammogram's low efficacy, particularly among the many women with dense breasts.

It's enraging that in part because of simplistic, patronizing messages from cancer health 'authorities' we haven't gotten further in the breast cancer battle--that 40,000 American women continue to die each year and another two million go through grueling treatment. Thus, I'd suggest the below three tactics toward healthier, more sustainable ways to deal with breast cancer. I'm no scientist--I'm a journalist who has two daughters and I want all three of us (and my husband, since 400+ men die of breast cancer annually) to strive toward keeping ourselves and every other citizen as healthy as possible.

One: We need to ask pointed questions about the game plan promoted by prominent breast cancer players, and educate ourselves so we can act on the smartest strategies. Two: Women need the full truth about routine mammograms, and we should demand that our providers and health officials get us (quickly!) better, less risky detection technology. Three: We need to amp up our prevention tactics with actions such as thoroughly avoiding pollutants (including those used in manufacturing many pink-linked beauty aids, baubles, and foods) that are likely

more to blame than a woman's faulty genes or fitness quotient.

And we all must insistently remind our health officials that other countries (in Europe, Asia, even Mexico!) are doing much more to remove pollutants, so why aren't we doing more to reduce not only breast cancer but many other ailments caused by the unholy mix of hormone-disrupting pesticides, fertilizers, pharmaceuticals, and caustic chemicals that have ended up in our food, water, and air and put us all at risk?

Finally: Maybe we need a new color for this effort, like a manly navy blue (which would look good paired with pink). Because the same estrogenic endocrine-disrupting compounds (EDCs) linked with breast cancer are very bad news for males. A multiplicity of studies (and many, many august experts, including this grave new report from the 14,000-member international association of endocrinologists) are turning up increased genital abnormalities, prostate and testicular cancers, sperm quality and quantity drops, and other disturbing trends. Perhaps if men became just as dedicated to 'racing for the cure,' the race would be ending much more quickly!

RETHINK THE PINKOCRACY

October's pink push is problematic, with cancer victims aplenty angry that their pain is used as a marketing device that misleads the public and promotes 'slacktivism.' Most pink-promoting companies "are not donating their own money; they are just passing on their customers' money," says The Assertive Cancer Patient blogger Jeanne Sather in a *Daily Finance* piece noting how companies can profit hugely from increased pink sales yet divert just a few cents per product to cancer causes. Adds Breast Cancer Action (BCA) director Barbara Brenner, "people have come to believe that if they just do what they're told by corporate America, whether buying a product or doing a walk, they'll solve the breast cancer problem and not have to think about it."

Check out the wealth of info from pinkwashing critics such as Breast Cancer Action's Think Before You Pink campaign, which detail how many corporate backers profit from breast cancer or manufacture products using substances implicated in breast and other cancers, such as organochlorines, herbicides, or animal growth hormones.

For example, critics such as veteran women's health advocate and writer Barbara Ehrenreich note that AstraZeneca, long a leader in the global multi-billion-dollar breast cancer pharmaceuticals market, founded National Breast Cancer Prevention Month--the generator of Pink October frenzy--in 1985, when then-Zeneca was also in the business of making pesticides deemed "probable human carcinogens" by the EPA. NBCAM is still controlled by AstraZeneca and its single-minded 'get-your-mammogram' mantra echoed by cosponsoring radiological and oncology associations and cancer establishment organizations. Other breast cancer heavy-hitters such as the American Cancer Society and the Susan G. Komen Foundation are also too influenced by corporate backers, say critics such as *Pink Ribbons Inc.* author Samantha King and *No Family History* author Sabrina McCormick. The result (seen most clearly in NBCAM materials) is that breast cancer's environmental causes are avoided or downplayed to focus instead on directives to get mammograms, stay fit, and when diagnosed, obey conventional treatment regimens.

So what's the best way to navigate pernicious pinkwashing and still support the breast cancer cause? Whatever you choose to do, speak out, advises BCA's Brenner: last year's BCA campaign to get Yoplait to stop using the dairy cow growth hormone rBGH succeeded. For instance, if you're seeing red because pink-marketed beauty products often contain ingredients linked to cancer, join up with groups such as the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics or just fire off an email or ten to companies. Check around for alternatives and join in with the many breast cancer organizations that fit your priorities. Or participate with ones you find problematic, but let leaders know your objections and suggestions for improvement.

Persistent advocacy from thousands of women and activist organizations have created much change in acknowledging and attacking all probable causes of cancer including environmental ones, writes Susan L. Ley in her new book, *From Pink to Green: Disease Prevention and the Environmental Breast Cancer Movement*, with mainstream groups and advocacy groups increasingly joining forces on research and prevention tactics. The result: We're all more informed and empowered.

Part 2: Reconsider Cancer Detection, and Re-vision Prevention--and We All Win

