

Armed With Information: My fight against breast cancer

by Carol Ann Coolidge, M.D.



Twenty years of working with patients through medical school, residency, and private practice could not prepare me for the message my doctor was about to deliver.

“You have breast cancer.”

With more than 200,000 new cases of breast cancer diagnosed in the U.S. every year, I shouldn't have been so surprised. But I was. As a plastic surgeon, I had always been on the other side of the physician-patient relationship. For the first time, I realized I had little control.

The oncologist and surgeon reassured me that the cancer had been caught early. The small lump would be treatable with a 6-week course of radiation. As I had in medical school, I gathered as much information about breast cancer treatment, survival rates, and success stories as I possibly could.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

My theory: arming myself with information and positive thinking would be the first step to beating my cancer. As with any medical condition, the more you know, the more you feel in control. I wanted to ask the right questions, understand the answers, and work with the physicians and nurses who would provide my care. It's advice I would give ANY woman facing ANY medical challenge.

- What diagnostic testing is involved—how long will it take to get the results?
- What treatment options are available—are there side effects that I should know about before choosing one over the other?

- What is the treating physician's experience and success rate?
- Should I think about getting a second opinion?

One of the most important things I tell patients of my current practice—is that I want them to have ALL of their questions answered before we make any decisions on a course of action.

INFORMATION IS POWER!

Whether it's cancer, diabetes, or heart disease—the Internet has countless options for finding information on a given topic. These websites offer direct, easy-to-understand resources:

www.healthywomen.org Check out “Health Topics A-Z,” info on more than 100 women's health issues.

www.womenshealth.gov Great resource for official government statistics.

www.komen.org The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation's official site includes thorough information for patients and their families, including online support groups.

PATH TO A HEALTHY FUTURE

The fight with breast cancer zapped every ounce of my energy—more than I anticipated. Now back at work after an 18-month leave of absence, I'm feeling happier and stronger than before. My new schedule now includes fewer work hours, more exercise, as well as regular mammograms and clinical breast exams. I'll remain vigilant for the rest of my life—watching for lumps, ready to alert my physician if anything changes. Equipped with the tools of information and experience, I will have an easier time asking the right questions—a confident partner in my own future health.

Dr. Carol Ann Coolidge is a board-certified plastic surgeon affiliated with Coastal Carolina Medical Center. Dr. Coolidge specializes in breast surgery (reconstructive & cosmetic) and body contouring (liposuction & tummy tucks). For more information about Dr. Coolidge's practice, please call (843) 208-2808.

Hope is what allows you to keep going even in the face of adversity and despair. With this to sustain you - your strength will be boundless. -Ameet Bakhai