

Seeing Pink

October has become synonymous with pink ribbons and breast cancer. You can't miss the numerous events and products that raise awareness of breast cancer and funds for research. Today's public discussion and media presence regarding breast cancer has dramatically changed in the past 40 years. In the 1970s, Betty Ford and Happy Rockefeller, wives of prominent U.S. politicians, were considered courageous, if not bold, when they spoke publicly about their breast cancer. How did we get from being brave to this being a commonplace announcement? What does this plethora of pink mean?

I recently watched a thought-provoking and provocative documentary called *Pink Ribbons, Inc.*, based on a book by King (2008). *Pink Ribbons, Inc.* shows the devastating reality of breast cancer in a group of women with metastatic breast cancer and contrasts that with the business of marketing products with pink ribbons for a cause that often depicts healthy, happy women. This marketing approach is used on hundreds of products and each promises that a portion of the cost will be donated to a breast cancer cause. However, criticism has arisen about how much money actually is donated, to what organizations, and for what purposes. What does it mean when you can buy a pink hammer or a Harley-Davidson® motorcycle? Unfortunately, it has become more about the marketing rather than the cause.

Using ribbons as a symbol of a cause started back in 1979 when yellow ribbons were used to remind people of the 52 Americans held hostage in the American Embassy in Tehran, Iran. The first cancer ribbon was salmon colored and was created by Charlotte Haley to encourage the National Cancer Institute to invest more funding into cancer prevention (Breast Cancer Action, 2012). In 1992, the ribbon became pink and linked with breast cancer. It became a visible recognition that the person with breast cancer was not alone. Since that time,

almost every cancer, and many other diseases, have a special color for their ribbons. But what does it mean when you wear a ribbon? What do you think of when you see someone wearing one?

During my long career in oncology nursing, I have witnessed the good that has come from the increased public awareness and patient activism that these ribbons originally represented. The voice of the person with cancer is more often welcomed at the table or on the team. This was not the case decades ago when cancer was more of a whisper than a public statement. These ribbons and wristbands and corporate sponsorships have led to significant funding for research and support services, which has benefitted many cancer survivors.

But I worry about how ubiquitous the pink ribbon has become. And there is resentment from those with less visible cancers or other disease groups who have not benefited as much from all this public awareness and support. Just look at lung cancer. That ribbon is clear—and they have been invisible for far too long.

As someone who has had breast cancer and who takes care of women with breast cancer, I must admit to feeling uneasy when October comes around each year. Ehrenreich (2010) wrote about the pressure to think and be positive in the culture of pink. Ehrenreich did not want to do this. In addition, Sulik's (2010) *Pink Ribbon Blues* also tackles many of these issues.

I would like us to pause this month and think about women with breast cancer who do not see themselves represented by all the pink merchandise or the feel-good activities. What can we do for them? Some of us are actively involved in planning breast cancer awareness activities. If so, ask yourself what activities,

programs, and services address women living with advanced cancer? Will women with advanced breast cancer feel welcome at the plethora of pink activities this month? If not, make adjustments so they do. Another thing you can do is to ask the following questions from Breast Cancer Action (2012).

- Does any money from this purchase go to support breast cancer programs?
- What organization will get the money? What will they do with the funds?
- Is there a cap on the amount the company will donate?
- Does this purchase put you or someone you love at risk for exposure to toxins linked to breast cancer? What is the company doing to ensure that its products are not cancer causing?

If you have doubts about your pink ribbon purchase after reviewing these critical questions, consider giving directly to a breast cancer organization whose work you believe is most essential to addressing the breast cancer epidemic.

As oncology nurses we must be careful stewards of our support and advocacy—whether with our money, time, or association. Put that effort to good use. And remember, there are many shades of pink.

References

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