



## Men dealing with breast cancer: The experiences and challenges of living in a pink ribbon world

Bette Weinstein Kaplan

**M**en do get breast cancer, although certainly not as frequently as women do, with male breast cancer (MBC) accounting for fewer than 1% of breast cancer diagnoses worldwide.<sup>1</sup> From 1973 through 2005, there were a total of 5,494 cases of male breast cancer and 835,000 cases of female breast cancer, according to the Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) registry.<sup>1</sup> Men are often older than 60 years when their disease is diagnosed, and the incidence is apparently highest among black men.<sup>1</sup>

### MORE ADVANCED AT DIAGNOSIS

At diagnosis, the man with breast cancer may have more advanced disease than a woman does, usually because he does not realize that the breast lump he has found or the sporadic pain he feels should be addressed or because he is embarrassed to discuss it with his health care provider. The lesion might also be hidden by gynecomastia, although that condition is not associated with MBC. That so many men delay contacting their health care providers is unfortunate because invasive ductal carcinomas comprise the majority of tumors (85%–95%) in men, followed by ductal carcinoma in situ (5%–10% of tumors).<sup>2</sup>

### GENETIC PREDISPOSITION

Approximately 15% to 20% of men with breast cancer have a family history

of breast or ovarian cancer (Table 1). Estimates are that about 10% of them usually have a genetic predisposition, most often being carriers of the *BRCA2* gene. The estimated lifetime risk of breast cancer is 5% to 10% among male *BRCA2* carriers, compared with a general population risk of 0.1%.<sup>3</sup>

### HOW CAN I GET BREAST CANCER? I'M A MAN!

Statistics tell an epidemiologic story, but they don't tell the patient's story. The numbers reinforce how rare male breast cancer is, but they don't describe what it is like for a man to live with

and be treated for what is perceived as a woman's disease. Fortunately, a number of men with breast cancer have written about their experiences for the benefit of others. Some male breast cancer patients have given interviews, and several have established support groups or blogs on the Internet.

When a man learns he has breast cancer, he reacts to the news the way a woman does, only more so: with shock, disbelief, and the feeling of numbness. "How can I get breast cancer? I'm a man!" "Maybe there's a mistake in the diagnosis." "What now?"

The difficult process of diagnosis is unusually challenging for a man with MBC, as can be expected in a world awash in pink ribbons. Here is a description from the patient-blogger site Dr. Z's Zombie-A-Go-Go:

My doctor looked at it and recommended further testing. And here's where the indignity kicked in. Believe me when I say that there is nothing more emasculating than being a man and having to go get a [mammogram]. The waiting room, the exam room, even the consultation room are all festooned in the ubiquitous pink imagery and ribbons of the woman's breast cancer movement. And there is nothing so embarrassing and cringe inducing than being a five foot ten inch, 240 pound, shaved head man with a bad attitude

**TABLE 1. Risk factors for male breast cancer**

Aging
Exposure to estrogen
Family history
Heavy alcohol use
Inherited mutations
Klinefelter syndrome
Liver disease
Obesity
Occupation
Radiation exposure

Source: American Cancer Society. [http://www.cancer.org/docroot/cr/content/cr\\_2\\_4\\_2x\\_what\\_are\\_the\\_risk\\_factors\\_for\\_male\\_breast\\_cancer\\_28.asp](http://www.cancer.org/docroot/cr/content/cr_2_4_2x_what_are_the_risk_factors_for_male_breast_cancer_28.asp). Reviewed and revised January 14, 2010. Accessed June 15, 2010.

who has to sit in the waiting room—all while explaining to the young, vacuous, and gum snapping female receptionist, “No, it’s not a mistake. I’m supposed to be here for a mammogram. And thanks for letting everybody in the waiting room know.”

The indignity continued.

The mammogram was inconclusive—and so they immediately walked me over, shirtless and wearing a paper gown made for a petite woman—to get an ultrasound. . . . Afterwards, I was allowed to get dressed. . . . After ten minutes, the technician who’d done the ultra sound (wearing nursing scrubs with more of those Pepto-Bismol pink ribbons on it) came back. . . .<sup>4</sup>

### TREATMENT

The unique aspect of being a man with breast cancer fades rather quickly, and the man with MBC focuses on the question asked by every patient who has been told that he or she has cancer: what is the most effective treatment? There are the same considerations as for a woman with breast cancer.

Axillary node involvement is found in about half of men with MBC. Since men have less breast tissue than women and men have a mean tumor size of 2.4 cm, the most common surgical procedure for male breast cancer is mastectomy. Among men, 70% of patients have modified radical mastectomies, 8% to 30% have mastectomies, 5% to 14% have total mastectomies, and up to 13% are treated with lumpectomies with or without radiation.<sup>5</sup> For men with node-positive tumors, chemotherapy plus tamoxifen and other hormonal therapy can increase survival as effectively as it does in women with breast cancer.

### HOW AM I GOING TO SURVIVE THIS?

Patients with MBC rely on strong support systems to get them through the

ordeal of treatment. A number of men who have written about their disease say their religious faith has helped them. Others find different sources of support. Patients with male breast cancer use their disease to educate by speaking out, making public appearances, or communicating through the Internet. One patient, younger than most, wrote that he talked with everyone he could about his disease, that he wasn’t embarrassed about being a male with breast cancer, and that he used these conversations as a type of self-guided therapy to help him accept his diagnosis:

... approximately five days after diagnosis, I came to terms with the cancer. Only one word describes [this], and that is *acceptance*. I had a kind of an epiphany in a non-religious way. I accepted the fact that there was nothing I could do, apart from having the operation and any treatment thereafter. It was that simple, and I became very positive from that time on. This helped [me] tremendously for what was to come.<sup>6</sup>

Family members who have had cancer themselves rally to help their relative with MBC. Sometimes a wife and husband both develop breast cancer. A recent article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* described just such a situation. First, Franny Koniers was treated for breast cancer, and her husband, Chris Koniers, was so supportive that he even shaved his head when his wife lost her hair during treatment. Then he found out that he had breast cancer too. “I was, of course, shocked. A little scared,” says Koniers. “I knew [Franny] had been through this—and that millions of other women had,” he says. “That made me realize that I could do this, too.” His wife added, “Our feeling was, here we go again!” . . . “We were stunned, but we also were determined to see this through together.”<sup>7</sup>

### THE AMA’S NEW MBC POLICY

At the American Medical Association’s 2009 House of Delegates annual meeting, the organization passed a new policy recognizing that breast cancer affects males as well as females. The

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### Selected resources for more information

#### Out of the Shadow of Pink

[www.outoftheshadowofpink.com/Male-Breast-Cancer-Site-Links.html](http://www.outoftheshadowofpink.com/Male-Breast-Cancer-Site-Links.html).

#### Breast Cancer in Men.org

[www.breastcancerinmen.org](http://www.breastcancerinmen.org)

#### Dr. Z’s Zombie-A-Go-Go

<http://zombieautumn.blogspot.com/>

#### American Cancer Society Detailed Guide: Breast Cancer in Men

[www.cancer.org/docroot/cric/content/cric\\_2\\_4\\_1x\\_what\\_is\\_male\\_breast\\_cancer\\_28.asp](http://www.cancer.org/docroot/cric/content/cric_2_4_1x_what_is_male_breast_cancer_28.asp)

#### National Cancer Institute: Male Breast Cancer Treatment (PDQ®)

[www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/treatment/malebreast/HealthProfessional](http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/treatment/malebreast/HealthProfessional)

#### Male Breast Cancer – Self-Exam, Risk Factors for Male Breast Cancer

<http://breastcancer.about.com/od/malebreastcancer>

## ISSUES IN CANCER SURVIVORSHIP

AMA is now supporting education about the risks, signs, and symptoms of male breast cancer, and it also supports insurance coverage for MBC monitoring and diagnostic methods.<sup>8</sup>

“Male breast cancer is rare, but it tends to be diagnosed at later stages,” said AMA Board Member Edward Langston, MD. “Heightened awareness of the increased risk in certain men may result in earlier detection of male breast cancer. Clinical breast examinations are effective at evaluating breast cancer symptoms, but mammography may also help.”<sup>8</sup>

### SPECIAL MALE CONSIDERATIONS

The men who live with and survive breast cancer have a number of gender-specific adjustments to make. While some use their disease to educate and help others, other men keep their diagnosis to themselves. Some men decide to have double mastectomies because MBC has such a strong genetic component. There are men who undergo breast reconstruction, while others do

not because they want to wear their scars proudly. And then there is the blogger who, about to undergo a mastectomy for breast cancer, is disappointed and angry about all the behavioral changes he will have to make to avoid lymphedema. Although he is irritated about not being able to give blood and having to avoid the sun, the thing that bothers him the most is that he has to forego the tattoo he was long planning for his upper arm!<sup>9</sup> ■

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