



BREAST CANCER A SURGEON'S PERSPECTIVE

WRITTEN BY DR. RICK DANIELS

As a surgeon, my hope is to start the healing process at the moment I tell a patient that she has breast cancer. In *The Physician Within You*, Gladys McGarey, MD, writes, "As a surgeon you can pull an incision together and suture it well, but you cannot make it heal... understand you are a channel through which healing moves. You are contacting the healing forces within your patients." I realize that my patients have put their trust in me to help them in the healing process. I learned to be a surgeon in medical school and in five years of Surgery Residency, but I am continuously learning how to be a healer. Mostly I learn that from my patients.

Another hope is that my patients have a sense of peace that I will do everything within my ability to take care of them and that I want them to be cured and to flourish. This is not to say that the path ahead is going to be easy. Surgery, possible chemo, radiation and sometimes hormonal treatments make the beginning of an uphill journey for them, and there is no one "right" way to react to a diagnosis. I often tell patients that it's okay to be who you are and react the way you react.

Every day, I learn something new about myself, about my profession and about the art of medicine. Most of what I learn transcends the articles in the surgical journals I read, the cases I perform, and the surgical techniques I continue to study and to fine tune. The most powerful and life changing events I have experienced as a physician are from my patients and the inspirational ways in which they respond to their health challenges. I have witnessed the power of the human will to heal itself and the power of faith that has been generously given to me through my patients' trust and the strength that I have witnessed as they dig deep in the face of cancer and other diseases.

Recently one of my most inspiring patients, Denise Mackey-Natz, said to me, "I don't want to be known as the person with breast cancer, or the breast cancer survivor - I just want to be me." Her approach translated into an amazing recovery and a healing from the inside out. She reminded me to treat "Denise the person" not "Denise the patient with breast cancer." Yet another lesson in how I try to be a channel for healing.

[Dr. Daniels is a partner at Evergreen Surgical in Eau Claire. He and his wife, Amelia, have four young children and enjoy travel, fitness, and family time.]

Cancer touched my life on a personal level when my father - the most kind, giving, and admirable person I have ever known - was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. He died three months after his diagnosis, and I spent two of those months taking care of him after I completed medical school. He died at the age of 57, a week after I left for my residency 1,700 miles away. Surgery was not an option for my dad given his advanced stage, but the pain of losing him has undoubtedly influenced my passion for surgery and for providing compassionate care to all of my patients.

When I am working with a patient with breast cancer, I am often the healthcare provider who has to break the news of this diagnosis. A patient comes to me most likely after a lump has been found or a mammogram has shown some abnormality, and I am often meeting her for the first time. I never take for granted the anxiety and fear that these patients experience as they await further results of biopsies and ultra sounds. It is one thing to discuss surgical treatments with a patient, but it is another to tell someone she has cancer. This diagnosis completely blindsides most patients, since 70% of patients diagnosed with breast cancer have no known risk factors. This shocking news is a very personal and, for some, a very private response that provokes fears of not only losing the physical aspect of one's womanhood but also the threat of losing one's life.

Cancer is a word that often provokes fear, anxiety, and, at times, a sense of hopelessness. To some degree, my patients have started processing what this diagnosis means for them and their loved ones, and they come to me for the operable treatment of their disease. One of the reasons I became a surgeon was that I was drawn to the surgical ability to fix a problem or to alleviate a person's pain or discomfort in a concrete way - such as removing a painful appendix or an injured spleen or relieving obstructed intestines. In the case of a person with cancer, surgery can be an effective chance at a cure by removing the cancer from his or her body.