

Metastatic breast cancer needs more attention

By Kelly Shanahan

Oct. 13 is Metastatic Breast Cancer Awareness Day. It is important to recognize the elephant in the pink room that is October: metastatic breast cancer, cancer that spreads outside the breasts, affects 155,000 Americans, killing 40,000 of us every year, yet it only receives 2 percent of breast cancer research dollars.

Metastatic breast cancer is rarely talked about, even during October, despite the fact that almost a third of women with early stage breast cancer develop metastases -- even 10, 20, 30 years later.



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Once diagnosed with metastatic disease, average life expectancy is only two to three years. We are never out of treatment. Our cancer is not curable, at least not in 2014.

Recently, I attended two conferences for women with breast cancer, one exclusively for women with metastatic, or stage four, disease. At these conferences I found great hope, meeting women who have lived full and productive lives for up to 20 years after being diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer.

However, without more money being spent studying metastatic breast cancer, we cannot make that 20-year survival the norm instead of the exception.

We don't even know why some breast cancers spread, and why other women with early stage disease are treated and never have a problem again. That is basic biologic research. We don't have standard treatments for metastatic breast cancer; put 10 women with 10 different oncologists in a room and you'll find 10 different treatments. That is basic clinical pharmaceutical research. But without more funding, that research cannot be done.

One of the problems with "Pinktober" is that all the cheery pink ribbons imply that breast cancer is no big deal if we are just aware and get our mammograms. That complacency, in turn, removes the sense of urgency to obtain more funding for more research, and also keeps us from addressing how to prevent breast cancer in the first place.

So many of those pink products contain chemicals that actually increase the risk of breast cancer, like BPA in hard plastic bottles and phthalates in cosmetics. And sugary, processed foods wrapped in pink also are counterproductive in preventing breast cancer. So this Oct. 13, I ask you not to pity me and the 155,000 other Americans living with metastatic breast cancer, but rather to support us as we fight for our lives. Support us as we advocate for more information, more funding. Support us as we live.

Kelly Shanahan is a 20-year resident of South Lake Tahoe and the owner of Emerald Bay Center for Women's Health. She has been living with metastatic breast cancer for 11 months. A mom, a wife, an active member of our community, she continues to work part time as a gynecologist even as she undergoes chemotherapy.