

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

December 15, 2013

## “Breast Cancer Treatments Get More Confusing”

According to the American Cancer Society, there will be more than 1.65 million new cases of breast cancer diagnosed in 2013. The good news is that for many cancers, the prognosis will be very good and 90% of breast cancer patients will survive their cancers for at least 5 years. Treatment usually consists of combinations of surgery, radiation, chemotherapy and hormonal treatments (neoadjuvant therapies). Many factors, such as cell type, location, spread, aggressiveness, nutritional status of the patient, patient age, family history, etc, will have a bearing on the specifics of treatment. During my surgical training, radical mastectomies were common but have basically been abandoned. Next on the scene was "lumpectomy with irradiation." Also, there has been many chemotherapies, but some chemotherapy has been associated with "chemo-brain" and damage to the heart. Radiation can also have a long list of undesirable side effects. So, today we have raging debates concerning the appropriate treatments for breast cancer. Still, length of survival and quality of survival are of utmost importance to patients with this life-changing diagnosis. A new study suggests that tens of thousands of women might be able to skip at least some of the grueling treatments for breast cancer, without significantly hurting their odds of survival. The aim of the new studies is to curb over-treatment, which some believe is a big problem. One study found that many older women can skip radiation after surgery for early-stage tumors. Two others suggest that surgery may not help patients whose cancer has already spread widely. A fourth study tested a "light chemo" combination that could become a new standard of care. The trend is "less and less therapy" for certain cancer types. But, breast cancer is already widely spread in 5 to 20% of newly diagnosed patients (an ominous sign), for which, the main treatment is chemotherapy or hormone treatments that attack cancer throughout the body. The controversial issue and extent of surgery seems to be up in the air, as some patients can seemingly be spared the ordeal of having all or part of a breast remove. There is a huge difference of opinion among doctors regarding treatment recommendations. Fortunately, most breast cancers are found at an early stage. Between the clinical and preclinical studies, the scientific community is triangulating potential mechanisms and treatments to mitigate the adverse consequences of breast cancer therapies.

In the America that I love, patients should not be overwhelmed with questions or fear and they should feel comfort in detailed discussions with their physician and oncologist. Ask plenty of questions and let their expertise guide you through the treatment process. Above all, keep faith and spirit high. There are many inspiring and heart-warming stories out there.

Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate

27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444

985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell

[rhowesmd@hughes.net](mailto:rhowesmd@hughes.net) |

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

