

Breast Cancer Legislation

By Reg P. Wydeven
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October is breast cancer awareness month. Breast cancer afflicts millions of women in the U.S. each year. I'm sure that everyone reading this article unfortunately knows at least one woman who has suffered from the disease.

As horrendous a disease as breast cancer is, it is beatable. The key to beating breast cancer is early detection. That's why everyone wears those pink ribbons - to remind women to routinely perform self-exams and to be sure to visit their physician for regular check-ups and mammograms.

If a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, various treatments can be used to treat the disease: radiation or chemotherapy, or lumpectomies or mastectomies. However, if the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer isn't awful enough, many women also suffer because they are immediately forced out of the hospital to return home right after surgery. To ensure these women are given the proper recovery time they need, U.S. Senators Olympia J. Snowe and Mary L. Landrieu and U.S. Representatives Sue Kelly and Rosa DeLauro introduced The Breast Cancer Patient Protection Act of 2005.

The Act, first introduced in 1996, aims to provide certain protections for women suffering from breast cancer. First, the Act would assure that women diagnosed with breast cancer are entitled to a second opinion. The second opinion would not only be to confirm a proper diagnosis, but also to provide a possible alternative treatment plan.

The Act would also provide greater support for women undergoing lumpectomy treatment. Oftentimes, a lumpectomy may be the least invasive treatment for a woman suffering from breast cancer. However, because of the high cost of radiation therapy that typically accompanies a lumpectomy, some women elect to undergo a mastectomy. Though there are more complications involved with a mastectomy, many women have no financial alternative that to go this route because of the expense of radiation treatment.

The most ambitious goal of The Breast Cancer Patient Protection Act of 2005 is the eradication of the "drive-thru" mastectomy. The Act ensures that a health care provider cannot limit hospital stays for a mastectomy or breast-conserving surgery to less than 48 hours. The Act also assures a 24-hour stay for lymph node dissection.

Although most medical and nursing associations believe that most patients require longer hospital stays, "drive-thru" mastectomies are very common for breast cancer patients. Typically at the behest of health insurance companies, many breast cancer patients must leave the hospital after their surgery against the advice of their doctors while they are still in pain, groggy with anesthesia and with drainage tubes still connected.

In addition to millions of breast cancer patients, the Act is supported by various groups, such as the American Medical Association, the American College of Surgeons, the American Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons, the Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses, Families USA, and the Lifetime women's television network.

In fact, Lifetime has been involved with getting the Act passed since its inception in 1996. As part of the network's Stop Breast Cancer for Life advocacy campaign, Lifetime has collected more than 10 million petition signatures from viewers who have showed support for Congress to pass the bill. For more information and to electronically sign the petition, log on to www.lifetimetv.com.

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