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“Team Approach” Improves Outcomes for Breast Cancer Patients

By David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS

The American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) and the American Society of Breast Surgeons (ASBS) recently began urging breast cancer patients to insist their physicians use the “team approach” to manage their care. In recognition of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month, I’d like to share some comments on this approach because studies show it can significantly improve outcomes and quality of life. Unfortunately, it is greatly underutilized.

Recent statistics reveal that the majority of women who would be candidates for breast reconstruction following mastectomy are not currently being informed of their reconstructive options early after their initial diagnosis. For certain population groups such as minority women the access to reconstruction may be even more limited.

The team approach includes the patient’s gynecologist, radiologist, breast surgeon, medical oncologist, and a plastic surgeon, working together right from the outset.

"Involving key specialists early in the process allows for more coordinated care and fosters the most beneficial outcome...as opting for breast reconstruction can affect the techniques surgeons use to remove the cancer," says ASPS President Dr. McGuire.

Adds Patrick Whitworth, MD, ASBS Past Chairman: “Women diagnosed with breast cancer have the power, authority, and right to request the team approach...perhaps with these voices, the team approach can become standard practice.”

The plastic surgeon's role on the team is to ensure that the woman knows all of her reconstructive options before her cancer is treated and removed, and that the best reconstructive procedure is performed. When not presented with reconstructive options before mastectomy, or if the reconstructive procedure is not expertly performed, there can be significantly negative effects on the patient’s quality of life beyond the disease.

Last year, nearly 90,000 breast reconstruction surgeries were performed, a significant increase over the prior year. We all look forward to the day when a cure for breast cancer might dramatically decrease the need for mastectomy and reconstruction. Until a cure is found, I encourage women to request and physicians to implement a comprehensive “team approach” for their patients with breast cancer.

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David J. Levens, MD, PA, FACS, in practice in Coral Springs since 1989, is a graduate of Columbia University-College of Physicians and Surgeons, certified by the American Board of Plastic Surgery, and former Chief of Surgery, Coral Springs Medical Center. He was named a Top Doc in Castle Connolly's national ratings for 2010. 954-752-1020.
www.DrLevens.com.