

How we help our patients “deal” with the aftermath of Breast Cancer

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Every week, I get to meet wonderful, vibrant women with very personal stories about how their recent diagnosis is going to affect their lives. Some are in their twenties, having never been married. Some are getting ready for their daughter's wedding while others are enjoying their senior years with their significant others.

But none of them are happy that their “disease” will require them to lose one or both of their breasts. The loss of a part of our body is difficult enough, but when a woman may lose part of what makes her feel special as a feminine or sexual being – that is really tough.

One of a plastic surgeon's passions is to help make individuals feel more whole and help them heal both physically and emotionally. Today, through the use of skin-sparing mastectomies, implants, tissue expanders, and the patient's own tissues, we can help recreate a patient's breast either at the same time as a mastectomy or at a later date.

The results are very good.

Barbara Feemster is a patient of mine who had breast cancer and is now a survivor. Here is her story:

Barbara Feemster: Dr. Greco helped restore my physical body

Someone told me early in this journey, “You need a sign that says, ‘This is all about me. I can't handle stress for five years.’”

In my battle, I found out early that this was not all about me. There were others who were greatly affected all around me, so I chose to live not as a victim, but victoriously.

You see, I have learned that even though my doctors' giftedness restored my new physical beauty, the most beautiful part of me is my heart, a place that cannot be touched by breast cancer. This is a place where God lives victoriously.

I was being stripped of what the world considers beautiful to save my life. Dr. Greco helped restore my physical body, thankfully, to a “new normal,” a place where I was able to heal physically and emotionally.

December 8th of last year, I discovered I had invasive ductal carcinoma cancer in both breasts. Having no history of breast cancer in my family and no sign of the malignancies in my mammograms a few days prior to diagnosis, you can imagine this came as a complete shock to my family and me.



Richard J. Greco, MD and Patient Barbara Feemster

We are thankful for the little dimple on my right breast, which was a forewarning of what was lurking beneath it. The first days after diagnosis were my deer in the head-light phase.

This was a time where we were praying for God's direction for my treatment. Honestly, it was a really tough time, where we were overloaded with information, but critical information we would need to know to journey the path that was the right one for me.

I was going to need a double mastectomy, and I wanted to have reconstruction done at the same time. Sometimes, this is not possible due to radiation needs or because the patient chooses not to move forward yet.

Because my cancer was in the early stages, Stage 1 on the left breast and Stage 2 in the right with three other suspicious areas present, reconstruction was a possibility immediately.

My surgeon referred me to Dr. Richard Greco and his team for plastic surgery. After my first appointment with Dr. Greco, it was decided that I would be a perfect candidate for a Tram Flap procedure, where tissue would be transferred from my stomach to my breast areas.

Dr. Greco and his office helped prepare me, answering multitudes of questions, and being available to talk to me throughout the entire journey. They took excellent care of me.

That means so much. I had my surgery December 30, 2009, and went home on New Year's Day.

I had some new friends, who accompanied me home. Six drains were attached to me – two in my stomach area and two in each breast.

These little guys would help with any excess fluid accumulation.

My husband would carefully strip them and measure the fluid. This was then reported to Dr. Greco's nurse.

As the fluid amount decreased, the drains were removed. Each day I found I was getting stronger and my incisions were healing.

My husband even bought me a new polka dot bra that I could wear about two weeks after surgery, and I realized that all of this was temporary. One day, I would get through this recovery period, and with God's help I would find that new normal.

The last phase of reconstruction

After five months of chemo, I was able to have the second phase of my reconstruction, which was the cosmetic part. I'll never forget the day when my bandages were removed, and I could see the final product.

My eyes filled with tears, and I was so thankful that gifted men like Dr. Greco could take me from such a devastating surgery to that new normal I hoped I would have. It has been a tough road, but I have learned that there is life during and after cancer.



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