

BEHIND THE MASK

Women are key to men's prostate-cancer awareness

Roberto was afraid. He almost took his prostate cancer back to Santiago, Chile. That's when Hope intervened. Hope, my secretary, spent hours listening to Roberto. So did his wife, my wife, his daughter and another woman who's a good friend. Roberto stayed.

Roberto did what many men do: In a time of emotional distress, he surrounded himself with women.

I am a prostate-cancer surgeon, and I see fragile men. Roberto's fear is not unique. Jeff was so afraid that he turned to blueberries, an unproven remedy, and let his prostate cancer spread. Sam booked and canceled surgery all over the country.

The problem starts before diagnosis: My team once found that 45 of 100 men told of the risk -- abnormal tests or exams -- leave medical care. Even men who are not at imminent risk seem troubled. Speaking at a lawyers' luncheon, I shared that prostate cancer is the most common cancer of lawyers. They noted this -- they almost stopped eating -- but from bother rather than thanks.

Does it matter? Think of six men you know; if you are thinking of African-American men, think of four. One of these men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer.

But does it matter? Don't men with prostate cancer often die of other things? Yes. Prostate cancer grows more slowly than pancreatic cancer. There is more of a chance that you will be killed by bird flu or someone dropping a piano on your head if you have prostate cancer than if you have pancreatic cancer. But there is another reason that men with prostate cancer often die of other things: effective prostate cancer treatment.

How many men actually die of prostate cancer? Five hundred -- every week. Enough to fill a jumbo jet. We lose 500 American fathers, sons, brothers and husbands to prostate cancer weekly. Does it help that prostate cancer grows slowly? If your plane were crashing, would you want it to go down slowly?

Julie Lewit-Nirenberg, a former publisher of *Mademoiselle*, had a high risk of breast cancer and had her breasts removed. She saw how organizations over the years had raised the public's breast-cancer awareness: Lee Denim Day and pink M&Ms, for instance, and Race for the Cure, which raised \$1 billion for research.

She saw a contrasting state of affairs when it came to the most common cancer in men -- prostate cancer. Awareness efforts were fragmented and sporadic, at best.

Energized and inspired by her experience with breast-cancer advocacy, Julie founded the American Prostate

Cancer Initiative.

She wants to target women to get through to the men in their lives. Why? Because she believes that women provide vital health information to men who are focused on other things.

But we must include men in this conversation, too. Men can be eloquent, as were Intel executive Andy Grove and broadcaster Pat Robertson when they were diagnosed. Such gifted communicators as Colin Powell, who had prostate cancer surgery, likely would do more if we all did more.

The Initiative is launching a national work-based awareness event. On June 15, for Father's Day, wear your sneakers to work. Close them with sky-blue laces from Sneakers at Work.

Managers can register their businesses now (www.sneakersatwork.org or www.laprp.com/sneakers.html)

"Generating awareness is the first step to saving lives," says Barry E. Johnson, president and CEO of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce. He said that companies "need to keep up with market trends and technology to win business, and they need to focus on regular prostate examinations to potentially win a battle for life."

Adds Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen: "My father had prostate cancer and I know that this is a problem that impacts the entire family unit, not just the one afflicted. He beat his cancer and others can also. It takes a nationwide campaign -- but at a local level -- to better educate the public and find a cure soon. Let us all join in this fight."

Roberto sat by the water and looked to blue skies. He reflected: "If I had known that I would be here, with you, three days after surgery it would have saved me anguished and sleepless nights." He asked: "Do you know the value of knowing?"

ARNON KRONGRAD, M.D., Miami

Arnon Krongrad is chief executive officer of the Krongrad Institute and medical advisor to the American Prostate Cancer Initiative. This is an occasional report on medical issues.

