

Let Cancer Patients Work

Those of us who have chosen a career in cancer care have seen the impact of serious illness on the lives of courageous people. That's why I am writing this in recognition of Breast Cancer Awareness Month - for those who have breast cancer and for those who will be diagnosed.



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Advances in cancer treatment and early detection, especially in the area of breast cancer, have led to remarkable improvements in survival and cure rates. In addition, the management and treatment of side effects have enabled more people with cancer to continue working while they receive radiation and chemotherapy. However, these advances have given rise to many new issues involving cancer and the workplace.

Many false perceptions about breast cancer still abound in our society, and the workplace is no different. We want to set the record straight so more of our workplaces are educated and informed.

Here are the facts. Breast cancer is the most common form of cancer in America, excluding skin cancers. An estimated three million women in the United States are living with breast cancer - two million who have been diagnosed and an estimated one million who do not yet know they have the disease.

Nearly a quarter million new cases of breast cancer will be diagnosed this year among women in the United States; more than 40,000 American women die from the disease each year.

Even though the public's understanding of cancer is generally improving, some prejudices and wariness remain in the workplace.

Employers may assume that having cancer means a worker can no longer perform the same tasks or is a poor risk for promotion. Co-workers may worry that they will be required to do extra work. Employers and co-workers may make the same assumptions about the role of caregivers.

However, the American Cancer Society reports that many women with breast cancer say that they are glad they shared information about their illness with people at work.

Because you are a valued employee, a great boss and a trusted co-worker, here is what you can do to circumvent the basic misunderstandings that are at the root of most workplace discrimination:

- Dispel the myths: people with cancer are productive contributors and cancer does not mean death.
- Highlight the facts: cancer symptoms such as nausea, fatigue and pain can often be treated with medications that have few side effects.
- Promote education: everyone can benefit from learning about prevention and early detection, and it can eliminate discrimination against workers with histories of cancer.

People with cancer tend to be industrious employees with a renewed appreciation for their personal and professional contributions. Progressive employers are encouraging organizational change to help cancer patients accomplish their job duties. A first step is to discuss with an employee coping with cancer the available options, such as flextime, job sharing or telecommuting.

The good news is that increased awareness of the importance of self-examinations and periodic mammograms has led to early detection. As a result, a diagnosis of breast cancer no longer is a death sentence, but rather a workable challenge with an increasing success rate.

During Breast Cancer Awareness Month, remember that women diagnosed with breast cancer live bravely among us. They are our mothers, wives and daughters. And, yes, they are also our hard-working bosses, co-workers and employees.

We encourage employers to actively support their employees who are striving to overcome cancer. The side effects of breast cancer treatment are temporary. The results of your support will last a lifetime.