



Commentary

The Komen–Planned Parenthood Controversy: Bringing the Politics of Breast Cancer Advocacy to the Forefront

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Introduction

In the midst of the many political attacks against Planned Parenthood and abortion rights over the past year (Guttmacher Institute, 2012b), the news that Komen for the Cure was halting future funding to Planned Parenthood for breast cancer screening and breast health education still managed to create shock waves among women's health advocates and the general public. Within hours of the news breaking, social media sites erupted with the sounds of outrage and significant pressure was placed on Komen to reverse its decision (Gates, 2012; Lynch, 2012b; Preston & Harris, 2012). As the national interest in the controversy grew, news outlets began to focus on the socially conservative employee within Komen who was seen as engineering a new policy to provide cover for the defunding of Planned Parenthood (Lynch, 2012a). Unable to withstand the pressure or fearful of growing public backlash, Komen reversed its decisions and amended its policy to allow Planned Parenthood to continue to be eligible for new awards (Belluck, Preston, & Harris, 2012). Soon the media coverage declined and the world of online pundits turned to trying to assess the damage done to the Komen brand and the implications of the debate for Washington politics (Cohen, 2012; Sauer, 2012; Sutton, 2012).

What remained unaddressed in the media frenzy surrounding the Komen–Planned Parenthood faceoff was the reality that breast cancer, and Komen's approach to breast cancer advocacy, have a history of politicization (King, 2006;

Klawiter, 2008; Ley, 2009; McCormick, 2010; Rosser, 2000; Steingraber, 2000; Sulik, 2011; Weisman, 2000; Zones, 2000). Although feminist health scholars have explored the politics of breast cancer over the past decade, the general public has remained largely supportive of Komen. Additionally, despite previous critiques in the media of Komen's prioritization of organizational branding at the expense of supporting smaller breast cancer organizations (Bassett, 2010), their questionable fundraising partnerships (Singer, 2011), and their reluctance to address potential environmental causes of breast cancer (Silverstein, 2011), the Planned Parenthood controversy was largely presented as shocking because it was seen to many as the first time that politics interfered with Komen's practices (Morgan, 2012). Unlike the past instances of controversy surrounding Komen, the conflict with Planned Parenthood, in which abortion politics spilled over into Komen's funding policies, created a much larger public outcry and brought politics to the forefront of the discussion. Many women's health advocates who had supported both Planned Parenthood and Komen in the past, likely seeing both organizations as significant players in different aspects of women's health, were placed in a situation where they felt they had to make a choice, and many, at least initially, chose Planned Parenthood (Bassett, 2012; Lopatto & Edney, 2012).

In this commentary, we argue that although breast cancer has been used as a tool among abortion opponents, this rare spilling over of abortion politics into breast cancer advocacy was only the most blatant example of politics within breast cancer advocacy. We further argue that this controversy, given the widespread public response, is a significant opportunity for breast cancer advocates and women's health scholars to shed light on the more insidious politics of breast cancer and consider the future direction of breast cancer advocacy. We begin by briefly reviewing the history of how breast cancer has been used by anti-abortion proponents to scare women away from having abortions and how current anti-abortion tactics

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aimed at defunding Planned Parenthood made Komen a target of anti-abortion groups. We then address feminist health scholars' critiques of the politics of breast cancer and Komen's approach to breast cancer advocacy and argue that the intrusion of abortion politics into Komen's funding policy actually brought unprecedented attention to politics in breast cancer advocacy and therefore provides an opportunity for the public and women's health advocates to take a deeper look at the politics of breast cancer and reexamine our priorities.

The History of Breast Cancer in Abortion Politics

The connection between abortion politics and breast cancer first came about in the early 1980s when two scientists religiously opposed to abortion used rat models to demonstrate that abortion significantly increased the risk of breast cancer (Russo & Russo, 1980; Russo, Tay, & Russo, 1982). In 1994, a study in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* brought the debate out of the laboratory and into the public arena (Daling, Malone, Voigt, White, & Weiss, 1994). The study was widely embraced by abortion rights opponents. Not long after, in 1997, the *New England Journal of Medicine* published the first study on the issue that found no relationship between abortion and breast cancer (Melbye et al., 1997). Rejecting this new scientific evidence, supporters of the Abortion Breast Cancer ("ABC") link sought political support for their position (Jasen, 2005). In 1999, with backing from then-Congressman Tom Coburn, anti-abortion scientists and activists pressured the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to modify its website on the subject to say that the scientific evidence on the ABC link was "inconsistent." Then, under further pressure from the George W. Bush presidential administration, the NCI would revise its website to actually suggest an association between abortion and breast cancer (Mooney, 2005). Scientists in the field and abortion rights supporters joined forces to resist this action. In 2003, the NCI removed the webpage and scheduled a scientific conference on the topic of abortion and breast cancer that concluded that there was no credible evidence of an association between the two (NCI, 2003). The following year *The Lancet* published the results of a massive reanalysis of available data, which again failed to find a link between abortion and breast cancer (Beral, Bull, Doll, Peto, & Reeves, 2004). Unfortunately, although this issue has been resolved in the scientific community, the ABC link remains an important strategy among anti-abortion groups. Today, seven states, owing to legislation supported by anti-abortion groups and legislators, require that women be informed of the unsubstantiated link between abortion and breast cancer (Guttmacher Institute, 2012a) and Americans United for Life (2010) promote model state legislation to expand this requirement.

To further their agenda, some anti-abortion groups have tried to utilize women's intense fear of breast cancer (Wider, 2005), by urging Komen, the largest breast cancer advocacy organization, to recognize the ABC link (Coalition on Abortion/Breast Cancer, 2012; Komen for the Cure, 2012). Additionally, although Komen did not attribute their new funding policy that would exclude Planned Parenthood to political pressure from anti-abortion groups, the organization has been under attack by such groups since they started funding Planned Parenthood clinics in 2005 (Texas Right to Life, 2012). With the 2011 hiring of Karen Handel, who in her unsuccessful 2010 run for governor of Georgia was adamant about her anti-abortion position and opposition to Planned Parenthood (Handel,

2010), as Komen's Senior Vice President of Public Policy, it seems that anti-abortion politics, even if temporarily, influenced the organization's policies. This decision, even though it was subsequently reversed, brought abortion, the most politicized women's health issue, and breast cancer, the seemingly apolitical and ever-popular women's health issue, to a head, with advocates on both sides of the abortion debate choosing sides (Morgan, 2012).

The Politics of Breast Cancer Advocacy

The coverage of the Komen–Planned Parenthood controversy often implied that this was the first time that politics was affecting breast cancer advocacy, which is not the case. Although Terry O'Neill, president of the National Organization for Women, was quoted as saying that Nancy Brinker, the founder of Komen, "is overseeing a fundamental transformation of her organization. It has become a political organization. It is no longer an organization whose mission is to advance women's health" (Morgan, 2012), many women's health scholars have addressed the more insidious politics of breast cancer and breast cancer advocacy years before the Planned Parenthood issue (Casamayou, 2001; King, 2006; Klawiter, 2008; McCormick, 2010; Rosser, 2000; Steingraber, 2000; Sulik, 2011; Weisman, 2000; Zones, 2000). Weisman (2000, 226) argued that although breast cancer is a "popular bipartisan political issue, this popularity does not imply that all groups share the same interests or agree on strategies." Rosser (2000) and Steingraber (2000) brought to light some of the major controversies in breast cancer research. Specifically, Rosser (2000) critiqued the biomedical model's focus on causes of disease at the cellular, hormonal, and genetic levels at the exclusion of potential social and environmental causes. Adding to this critique, Steingraber (2000) argued that despite the growing body of evidence suggesting that environmental pollutants increase breast cancer risk, there remains a political reluctance to address these issues because they would require collective action, chemical regulation, and corporate change as opposed to only addressing the disease on an individual level, which places the responsibility and blame for the disease on individual women.

Scholars have extended these critiques to breast cancer advocacy as well, arguing that the corporatization of mainstream breast cancer advocacy has created a conflict of interest in that some advocacy organizations may not be able to do what is best for women's health if it would offend their funding sources. Zones (2000, 120) examines the ways that corporations have "benefited from the prominence of breast cancer as a means to create wealth." She argues that when breast cancer advocacy organizations partner with companies that either stand to profit from breast cancer (e.g., pharmaceutical companies) or might contribute to cancer incidence (e.g., pesticide companies), a conflict of interest exists that will likely affect the advocacy (Zones, 2000). She uses the example of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, which was started by Zeneca, a pharmaceutical company that developed and sells tamoxifen, and later merged with Astra, a company that produces pesticides and herbicides that are thought to be carcinogenic (Zones, 2000). As the principle corporate sponsor of Breast Cancer Awareness Month with authority to approve or disapprove all related printed materials, the message of Breast Cancer Awareness Month has remained "Early detection is your best protection—get a mammogram now!" for the past

25 years (Zones, 2000, 144). Pertinent issues regarding the limits of mammography, environmental links to breast cancer, and unequal access to quality healthcare have never become part of the mainstream message.

Whereas early breast cancer advocacy in the United States sought to increase funding for breast cancer research, reduce the stigma surrounding breast cancer, raise awareness, and develop less harsh treatments for the disease, many women's health scholars argue that the current pink ribbon culture of mainstream breast cancer advocacy has become complacent. According to Sulik (2011, 60), "using breast cancer as a brand name has helped to divert public attention to 'the Cause' and away from some of the key factors that are getting in the way of disease eradication." Because mainstream breast cancer advocacy organizations have a financial interest in maintaining good relationships with medical, pharmaceutical, and corporate entities, scientific controversies are avoided or simplified (e.g., questions about effectiveness of chemoprevention drugs and screening mammography) and the increasing scientific evidence that exposure to common chemicals may contribute to breast cancer incidence is omitted, marginalized or downplayed (Sulik 2011, 61). In other words, although breast cancer was first seen as a social problem because it was being ignored by the government, scientists, and the public, "breast cancer as a social problem has become little more than a brand name with a recognizable pink logo" (Sulik 2011, 62).

Lessons from This Controversy

It took breast cancer, the sweetheart of health-related causes, and abortion, the most controversial women's health issue, colliding through the Komen–Planned Parenthood controversy this year to make the public take a step back and start to question the influence of politics in breast cancer advocacy. Although the politics of abortion are much easier to recognize, the politics of breast cancer are not something new. This controversy, unfortunately, may lead to cynicism about breast cancer advocacy in general, but we hope it is seen instead as an opportunity to think deeper about the current politics of breast cancer advocacy and more fruitful future directions. Although the alliance between the pharmaceutical industry, corporations, and advocacy organizations has led to the tremendous financial success of a few large breast cancer organizations, it has also served to stifle important conversations about breast cancer screening, treatment, and prevention; environmental links to breast cancer; and access to quality healthcare. The focus has been narrowed to an apolitical message of personal responsibility (e.g., reducing individual risk, getting regular mammograms), consumer activism (e.g., buying products to support the cause), and finding a cure (at the expense of focusing on prevention). Hopefully, those who stopped contributing to Komen or chose not to run in the Race for the Cure this year do not stop there. Rather, this is an opportunity to support breast cancer organizations that are addressing these pressing issues and to pressure Komen to broaden its approach to breast cancer, even if it means losing some corporate allies. If this controversy demonstrated anything, it was that when women's health advocates recognized politics at play in a breast cancer organization, they did not stand for it. Komen was held accountable and changed their policy. Now, we need to look beyond the clear politics of abortion and

recognize and challenge the more insidious ways that politics are at play in breast cancer.

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