

Prostate Cancer As A Family Disease: A Woman's Perspective

By Merel Grey Nissenberg, Esq.

Prostate cancer is not just a "man's disease". Indeed, a prostate cancer patient's spouse or significant other is affected in different, albeit strong ways. Women are typically the healthcare nurturers in any familial relationship and make approximately 85% of the health care decisions in every family. It is imperative that women take a proactive role in getting their men tested for prostate cancer, or at least to ensure that they have an informed decision-making conversation with their physicians. The goal should always be the early detection of potentially lethal prostate cancer. Then the partner needs to impart strength to that patient through many different channels.

I don't have any prostate cancer patients in my family, but I came to be involved in the disease when I began to handle late diagnosis cases of prostate cancer in my medical negligence law practice. I have handled cases of inexcusable late diagnoses in various states. In fact, one such case took me to North Carolina for trial where a patient was left out of any decision-making process and he passed away from metastasis of an unknown recurrence. One of the medical experts in another California case recommended that I serve on the Prostate Cancer Task Force for the California Division of the American Cancer Society, which I did. That led to a group of us forming the California Prostate Cancer Coalition in 1997. In 2004, we went on to form the National Alliance of State Prostate Cancer Coalitions. In all of my dealings with patients, with experts in urology, radiation or medical oncology and with scientific researchers, I have become extremely involved in the journey that prostate cancer patients take and the roles that their spouses play in that journey.

As with any caregiver, the wife or significant other of such a patient has to be strong and tireless; above all, that partner must acknowledge and emphasize hope. People who have been given a dire prognosis often go on to lead long lives, and in any event, they must be able to muster strength, a good portion of which comes from the support system of a partner. That is why patients in support groups do better than those without any support system at all. Even intimacy issues must be handled tactfully but honestly. There are methods for a sexual relationship even with impotence.

There is an intangible benefit in an optimistic outlook, in an uplifting partner, in being grateful for every day. Partners have their work cut out for them. My advocacy goals are to empower patients (and their partners) to have informed discussions about prostate cancer testing and to give them strength to make treatment decisions, including the choice of active surveillance, throughout the course of their disease. The goal of fostering hope and maintaining good thoughts is not easy but it is so valuable. Working with other advocates, we make a stronger voice for prostate cancer patients and their partners, although there is much to be done in this field.

Editor's note: Merel Grey Nissenberg, Esq., is President, California Prostate Cancer Coalition and the National Alliance of State Prostate Cancer Coalitions.