



words *matter*

By Caryn Sullivan

## **Breast Cancer: Add a Few Drops of Blue to the Sea of Pink**

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Monday night's historic bout between the Vikings and the Packers featured a clash of purple and yellow with green and gold – but my eyes followed the pink, an unusual color for such an event. Players sported pink cleats, gloves, and armbands; coaches wore caps with pink brims; and goalposts bore pink banners.

The prevalence of pink ribbons, the international symbol for breast cancer, is a testament to an impressive effort by the Susan B. Komen Foundation, and others, to raise awareness that invasive and non-invasive breast cancer will affect more than a quarter million women this year — and kill about 40,000. Since its inception in 1982, the Komen Foundation has created a worldwide organization of breast cancer survivors and activists, focusing almost exclusively on women. More than 2.5 million count ourselves as survivors.

But what of our male counterparts? On Monday night, swift-footed running backs, hulking defensive ends, even the famous #4, honored women by wearing pink. Yet I wonder whether they know they, too, could develop breast cancer. The pink campaign implies this is a female disease, but in fact, it affects both genders, although disproportionately. Websites such as [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) provide limited, but important information: Namely, that nearly 2,000 men will be diagnosed with invasive breast cancer this year and about 450 will die from it.

Six years ago, when I felt a suspicious lump in my breast, my husband insisted I see my doctor immediately. I had a mammogram, an ultrasound and a biopsy, and within a week, a breast cancer diagnosis. My family history consisted of a paternal grandfather who successfully battled breast cancer. Last August, when Minneapolis attorney Scott Wright experienced piercing pain in his left breast after running, he chalked it up to “runner's nipple.” He twice visited his doctor, who treated the condition as an infection. After four months of living with the pain and resisting his wife's counsel, Wright went to the doctor, got a mammogram, an ultrasound, a biopsy – and a breast cancer diagnosis.

When I detected a lump, I immediately suspected cancer. Wright, on the other hand, considered his pain the byproduct of running in the rain. The dichotomy is understandable. Women's breasts get a lot of scrutiny, through self-exams, physician exams, and routine mammograms. Women are told to be wary of lumps and to see a doctor if we have concerns. Let's be honest. If men are thinking about breasts, it is likely they are not their own. Rather, they worry about their prostates, hearts, cholesterol, and

virility. If they find an unusual lump or have a sore nipple, their first thought is not to see the doctor to rule out cancer.

Wright has turned his advocacy to raising awareness about male breast cancer. He is the founder of “The Team of Blue” and a board member of The John W. Nick Foundation ([www.malebreastcancer.org](http://www.malebreastcancer.org)). In 1995, Nancy Nick founded the non-profit organization to prevent the recurrence of her father’s experience. He visited three doctors in eight years and heard repeatedly he need not worry about symptoms that, belatedly, proved to be breast cancer. Like the Komen organization, the Nick Foundation strives to create awareness – but its message is that in the sea of pink, there are also waves of blue. The organization is gaining traction. This past summer the American Medical Association issued a new policy statement supporting expanded educational and awareness efforts about the risks, signs, and symptoms of male breast cancer.

Women benefit from international fundraising and educational efforts, research, support groups, and more. Approximately 75 percent of women over 40 now get routine mammograms, compared to 30 percent in 1982. Our survival rates surged from 74 percent in 1982 to 98 percent today. Yet, the number of men succumbing to breast cancer is increasing, underscoring the urgent need for better education about the importance of early detection for both sexes.

One of the Nick Foundation’s goals is to increase educational programs for family and general-practice doctors who rarely, if ever, see a male breast cancer patient. It would seem simple enough for physicians to perform potentially life saving breast exams on their male patients, as they do for their female patients, as well as to teach men to check their breasts for lumps or watch for unusual changes in their nipples.

Organizations like Komen have created an array of support services for women patients, including help with issues relating to sexuality. Male breast cancer patients not only have to deal with a frightening and potentially fatal diagnosis, they must also accept they have what is widely considered a woman’s disease. Taking a page from the female playbook, the Nick Foundation recently started a mentor program that provides ongoing support for newly diagnosed male patients.

Both the Komen and Nick Foundations were born of commitments to family members who lost their cancer battles. While the Komen Foundation has circled the globe, the Nick Foundation has been a lone voice in an important battle for well over a decade. Imagine what they could do by combining their efforts so all patients and professionals will be better equipped to identify and treat a disease that, while less prevalent, is as lethal to men as it is to women. When the purple and yellow meet the green and gold next October, I’ll be watching for hints of blue in the sea of pink.