

EDUCATING PATIENTS ABOUT BREAST RECONSTRUCTION: THE VICKY VICTORIOUS DOLL

Dealing with breast cancer at the age of 33 was the most devastating event of my life. My journey began when I noticed I was bleeding from my left nipple. I have worked in the health care field all my life, but I had a hard time facing the fact that I could have breast cancer. When I thought about breast cancer, it brought up images from my childhood when my grandmother was diagnosed. She was 80 years old, and no one wanted to talk.

At the time I noticed the bleeding, I worked as a nursing assistant on the women's health floor at my facility and often helped care for patients with breast cancer. For two weeks, I made every excuse about what could have caused the bleeding. I was too afraid to ask the nurses I worked with. I called the hospital's nurse on-call line only to hear the nurse say what I already knew in my heart—I had to go to my physician as soon as possible.

THE DIAGNOSIS

The beginning of my diagnosis was an uncomfortable experience, and I needed to find a new primary physician who would allow me to see the surgeon of my choice. This is how I met Edward Dalton, MD, breast surgeon, and Robert Feins, MD, plastic surgeon. I remember meeting Dr Dalton and having him tell me I had ductile carcinoma *in situ* (DCIS) and had to have a mastectomy. He spent more than an hour with me and my aunt explaining his reasoning and answering all our questions. Dr Dalton wanted me to meet two other physicians before I decided what I wanted to do. One physician was a radiation oncologist

and the other was Dr Feins.

I talked with the nurses on my unit often. They showed their support in every way possible. One nurse in particular, Victoria Gagnon, ARNP, spent hours with me, going over the preoperative and postoperative program we had on our medical-surgical unit. We discussed how they prepared patients for what to expect from day one until the day they go home. This helped me in making my decision to undergo the pedicle tram procedure.

THE BIRTH OF A NOTION

I found myself going to my physician's offices often because it was so hard for me to deal with the fact that I was soon going to lose a most important part of my body and "never be whole again." There was no other way around this situation. During one of my visits, Dr Feins tried to teach me how he would do this procedure using a doll. I found that the doll was not as detailed as it needed to be for me to get a clear understanding of the surgical procedure.

On Jan 4, 1999, I underwent a radical mastectomy with a pedicle tram procedure. I remained in the hospital for four days and was well cared for on the unit where I worked. My extensive, one-on-one preoperative education prepared me well for the postoperative recovery period. Approximately six weeks after surgery, I returned for the outpatient reconstruction of my nipple, officially completing the reconstruction period.

During my recovery, I decided to design a detailed doll for Dr Feins as a way to communicate what I thought I needed to know. Little did I know that Dr

Feins would take such an interest in my doll and encourage me to add other procedures.

When I showed the doll to Dr Dalton, he invited me to Orlando, Fla, to a meeting of the National Consortium of Breast Cancer where we set up a table to show my doll, which I named Vicky Victorious. This was only two and one-half months after my surgery. It was there that I was asked to add the mastectomy implant and latissimus dorsi procedures to the two procedures already included with the doll, the free tram and pedicle tram procedures. I proceeded to make a new doll that included all four surgical procedures (Figure 1). Dr Feins shared changes he felt were needed so the doll would be acceptable for all surgeons.

The founder of the Breast Care Foundation in New Hampshire introduced me to a patent lawyer at the Franklin Pierce Law Center, Concord, NH, get Vicky Victorious patented and trademarked. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of the doll goes to the Breast Care Foundation. Though I originally made each doll by hand, I now use a manufacturer to keep up with high demand.

CHANGES IN ATTITUDE

My breast cancer has helped me go from a person who never talked about breast cancer to one who goes to colleges, television shows, newspapers, interviews, and conferences around the United States to speak about my experience and show my doll. It is the people who are in the initial stages of dealing with breast cancer on whom Vicky has the greatest impact. She was born to help cancer patients understand what



Figure 1: The Vicky Victorious dolls, created to help patients undergoing breast cancer surgery visualize the various procedures, are used to demonstrate (from top to bottom) the pedicle flap, mastectomy implant, free flap, and latissimus dorsi procedures. The dolls were created by breast cancer survivor Wendy Winslow.

lies ahead, and she demonstrates the surgical alterations these patients will experience and have to cope with for the rest of their lives. She can help people overcome their fears associated with the diagnosis of breast cancer.

DEALING WITH CANCER

Whether it has been one week or 10 years, whether you are 20 or 85 years old, all breast cancer survivors have days that are hard to get through and they all shed tears. People often feel that after we have gone through surgery and had a mastectomy reconstruction, or chemotherapy or radiation therapy, we should be able to go back to our normal lives and move on as though nothing has happened. It is not that simple. Living through breast cancer is not something we get over—it is something we have to find a new way to live with. We have to change and find a new definition of normal.

I have been blessed to receive support from so many different people. I choose to speak about what happened to me because I see no reason for any woman to be ashamed of herself because she has or has beaten cancer. Though we would like our physicians to cure us, we all know that is yet to come. It is encouraging to know that technology has come as far as it has and physicians are always trying to find new and better ways to treat us.

Vicky Victorious helps cancer patients understand what is ahead of them and the changes in their bodies. With better understanding, maybe some of their fears will subside and patients can move forward. △

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Editor's note: Vicky Victorious is a registered trademark of Wendy Winslow, Manchester, NH.