

More than just a pink ribbon

Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnist
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(NNPA) - October is Breast Cancer Awareness month. If you flew Delta Airlines this month, you saw flight attendants with pink t-shirts, pink uniforms, as well as the ever-present pink ribbons.

A number of department stores have breast cancer awareness "sales" or passes, with dollars raised being donated to breast cancer research. In Washington, DC, women walked a whopping 60 miles over a three-day period to raise money for breast cancer awareness. There are billboards and public service announcements about breast cancer awareness.

Why? Breast cancer is the second leading cause of cancer death among women, after lung cancer. African American women are more likely than White women to die from breast cancer at every age. Although Black women are less likely to have breast cancer after 40, we are more likely to have breast cancer before 40. Since many health plans don't suggest or even allow a mammogram before 40, many young Black women go undiagnosed with breast cancer too long, which increases their likelihood of dying from breast cancer.

One of my personal heroes is a woman named Zora Brown. She started a group, Rise, Sister, Rise, to educate African American women about breast cancer. A 20-year survivor of breast cancer, Zora has authored books, produced television programs, and been a valuable resource around breast cancer awareness and education.

She lived in Washington, DC decades before she relocated to Oklahoma City where she continues to work on health care issues. There are far too few Zora Browns in our world, agitators in the African American community around health care issues.

While I appreciate the people wearing pink ribbons to raise awareness about breast cancer, we need to do a lot more than just wear ribbons. We need to ensure that women, especially young Black women, are doing everything they can to take care of their bodies. Most doctors will show women how to check their breasts for lumps, which is an important way to detect cancer possibilities early. Mammograms aren't painless, and some of us avoid them, but they are an important way to detect cancers and to ensure breast health.

Concern about breast cancer ought also be concern about health care. Indeed, while breast cancer is a leading cause of death among women, more women die from heart attacks than breast cancer. An amazing number of Americans do not get annual checkups, often because they simply cannot afford them. How many of the people wearing pink ribbons are also opposing health care reform, as proposed by President Obama?

How many who say they oppose a public role in health care want to keep their Medicare benefits? There is a lot of hypocrisy in this health care reform debate. It makes no sense to wear a pink ribbon without acknowledging health care as a basic human right.

We in these United States are experts at awareness. December 1 is World AIDS Day, and attention then will be focused on HIV and AIDS. Easter Seals campaigns have us focusing on people with disabilities. We raise awareness about polio, diabetes, and any number of other illnesses, and perhaps that is a good thing. But awareness does not equal treatment. Awareness does not equal access to health care. I wish we had ribbons to wear for health care

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reform.

Maybe they should be green ribbons since some of the interests opposing health care reform are moneyed interests. Or maybe they should be black ribbons for the number of folk who die because they don't have access to health care. Maybe there shouldn't be ribbons at all, maybe armbands. Mostly, there should be action, not just awareness.

The pink ribbons are better than nothing. They recognize the need for women to be more health-aware, and the challenges that young African American women face around breast health and the early diagnosis of breast cancer. But it would be interesting to ask some of the pink ribbon wearers where they stand on health care reform. On that question, we need people to do a lot more than just wear ribbons.

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