

Editorial

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Breast Cancer Screening and the Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities

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Years before the new breast cancer screening was established, whenever you hear about breast cancer, the buzz words was “early detection saves lives.” Translating this hype is easy: when breast cancer was found in its earliest stages of development, the five-year survival rate is 98% for certain groups.

At what age and how often should women start breast cancer annual screening was hotly debated in recent years, guidelines from the American Cancer Website changed from recommending annual mammography screening from age 40 to 45. And from every year to every other year starting at age 50. While the US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) listed their recommendation for breast cancer screening on their website especially mammography as: The USPSTF recommends biennial screening mammography for women 50-74 years.

Only 59% Asian American women over 40 years and older in the U.S. have had a mammogram in 2015, according to the CDC Health, United State 2016 report. Asian women has one of the lower rate of screening among all racial/ethnic groups even though breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosis among Asian and Pacific Islander women.

I have spent most of my career helping to educate women throughout the Asian community about breast cancer and helping them through a cancer diagnosis and into survivorship. But it has been a hard road with a lot of tragedy along the way, especially as that road travels through communities of color. For us, cancer is still “the big C” and that 98% survival statistic is a pipe dream. Numerous barriers stand between us and a mammogram, the best method of early detection, such as the lack of health insurance, a limited command of English, cultural and social taboos surrounding our breasts, and a lack of awareness of the screening to detect breast cancer early. Too often, Asian women who do not pursue screening told me that this is because they fear finding a lump, knowing that there is no cure to breast cancer. For some it’s even worse – they know they wouldn’t be able to afford treatment if they did find one.

When Congress continue to fight among themselves and no action is taken to ensure access to healthcare for all in the U.S., we will continue to see women dying needlessly from breast cancer due to the limited access to treatment.

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