

Closing the Awareness Gap for Women and Heart Disease

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"Heart disease is the number one killer of women, but lack of awareness is a close second," warned Martha Gulati, M.D., chief of cardiology at the University of Arizona-Phoenix. Gulati was speaking at the inaugural Heart of a Woman conference in Houston, Texas, hosted by Houston Methodist DeBakey Heart & Vascular Center and the Houston chapter of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs (NFBPWC), an affiliate of BPW International, on March 6, 2018. Having dedicated her career to studying and preventing heart disease in women, Gulati is part of the growing movement championing efforts to educate patients and physicians about women's heart health.

OVERLOOKING MATTERS OF THE HEART

"Sadly, we have not effectively conveyed the message to women that heart disease is their number-one killer," said Gulati. "When we do surveys, even if women understand the numbers, they don't see themselves at risk. They might say, 'Yes I know that statistic, but it does not apply to me. My number one risk is breast cancer.'"

Indeed, although heart disease now kills one in four American women¹—about 10 times the number that die from breast cancer—women (and their physicians) remain alarmingly naive of their cardiovascular risk, and thus less likely to take steps to ward off a largely preventable disease. According to the latest Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs survey by the Women's Heart Alliance, 45% of U.S. women ages 20-65 did not know that heart disease is the number one health risk for women. Perhaps more alarmingly, only 39% of primary care physicians (PCPs) surveyed ranked heart disease at the top of their concerns for women (following obesity and breast cancer), and only around half of cardiologists and PCPs felt that their medical training adequately covered women's heart health or knew that women's hearts are physiologically different from men's.²

"These statistics are pretty damning that we're not doing a good job spreading the message about the risk for heart

disease in women," said C. Noel Bairey Merz, M.D., director of the Barbra Streisand Women's Heart Center in the Smidt Heart Institute at Cedars-Sinai and one of the principal investigators of the WHA study. She and Gulati were keynotes speakers at Heart of a Woman, a patient education symposium that they hope will spark similar events around the nation.

To spread that message, Bairey Merz and Gulati support innovative, multipronged campaigns to reach out to women across all demographics. Bairey Merz would like to see a coordinated marketing strategy implemented similar to a political campaign and designed to tackle the implicit biases of our "very gendered society."

GETTING THE RED OUT

"One of the things that we're working on with the Women's Heart Alliance is using our Knowledge, Attitudes, and Beliefs data to formulate a better marketing campaign for heart disease awareness," Bairey Merz said. "The issue now is funding; this kind of campaign is going to be expensive. Look at what people spend on political races—that's marketing that shapes knowledge, attitudes and beliefs, so that's what we need to do."

Marketing strategies that target the lay media—newspapers, television, magazines, and the internet—have proven success in increasing women's awareness of health issues; multiple studies of women's heart disease awareness have found that women who have higher knowledge of heart disease risk factors tend to get their information from those sources.³ Ultimately, women's heart advocates would like to see heart



Martha Gulati, M.D.



C. Noel Bairey Merz, M.D., speaks at Heart of a Woman in Houston, Texas

disease achieve the same marketing success as breast cancer, but the Red Dress campaign has yet to catch fire like breast cancer's ubiquitous pink ribbon. Research indicates that women who are familiar with the Red Dress are more likely to know that heart disease is their gender's number one health risk³; however, relatively few women know about the symbol for women's heart health and the Red Dress appears much less often in the lay media compared to the pink ribbon.⁴

Another strategy is promoting patient education events like Heart of a Woman. These give women the opportunity to learn directly from experts, ask questions, and learn the tools to lower their cardiovascular risks and become advocates for their own heart health. Presenters at Heart of a Woman discussed heart disease risk factors, how to recognize women's unique symptoms, and strategies to improve personal heart health.

Heart health advocates are developing new partnerships with community and business organizations to expand their campaign. Heart of a Woman was the brainchild of NFBPWC Houston President Paola Ferrari, who teamed up with the Methodist DeBakey Heart & Vascular Center to bring experts in women's heart health from around the country to speak directly to Houston women. After seeing the success of the inaugural event, Elizabeth Benham—NFBPWC national president, former international president of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, and heart disease survivor—immediately launched plans to harness NFBPWC's widespread grassroots network to spread the message.

"After Heart of a Woman, I realized that women need to be much more aware of the terrible impact of heart disease and that NFBPWC needed to focus on this much more," she said. "We have begun to implement a nationwide strategy for all our affiliates to take on the Heart of a Woman program. Each affiliate will host an event to raise awareness in their communities, and I will be adding a section on women's heart health at each NFBPWC statewide conference. We will also dedicate a part of our monthly newsletter that goes to all our members to healthcare and particularly women's heart health."

Benham points out that grassroots organizations are uniquely positioned to spread healthcare messages through unexpected channels, whether including tips about risk and prevention in member publications or building partnerships between corporations and healthcare advocacy groups to reach women where they work, shop, or play.



Left. Heart of a Woman organizers gather after the 2017 conference



Right. Elizabeth Benham, NFBPWC National President

HELPING OBGYNS DELIVER HEART CARE

To that end, Gulati has helped cultivate a partnership between the American College of Cardiologists (ACC) and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) to not only create patient education literature but also prepare OB-GYNs to care for women with heart disease.

“The interesting thing about women is that when you ask them who their primary care physician is, more women identify an obstetrician-gynecologist than a primary care doctor in the classic sense of an internist or a family physician,” Gulati said. “From a patient’s perspective, their OB-GYN took care of them during their years that they were fertile and delivering children and all the way through their lifetime. OB-GYNs are the ones that tell women when to get a pap smear, when to get a mammogram, when to get immunizations, everything. They’re taking care of women throughout their lifetime—perhaps more so than we realized.”

This unique doctor-patient relationship makes the ACC-ACOG partnership particularly exciting for Gulati. It is an opportunity for cardiologists and OB-GYNs to unify their message and recommendations to women and reach patients when they are most attuned to their health. As editor-in-chief of CardioSmart, the ACC’s patient information website, she is working with ACOG to create patient handouts, infographics about pregnancy and heart disease, and a project called “Redefining the Post-Partum Visit” to expand post-pregnancy care to address longer-term healthcare goals.

“Pregnancy is like nature’s free stress test. Complications like preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, and pre-term delivery let us know who might be at risk for heart disease. Since over 80% of women do get pregnant during their lifetime, it’s an opportunity to identify that risk in younger women,” Gulati explained. “Pregnancy is a time when women are uniquely involved with healthcare professionals, which gives us a chance to intervene at a point that might make the difference between developing heart disease or not.”

Whether it happens through advertisements in women’s magazines, grassroots events, or post-partum visits, Gulati,

Beri Merz, and Benham are united in a common goal: empowering women to take charge of their heart health. They hope that by raising awareness and encouraging women to be proactive about reducing cardiovascular risk factors, they can make women’s heart disease a thing of the past.

“I really believe that if we empower our patients, they are going to be a very active voice,” Gulati said. “We should not underestimate what they want to know and what they need to know. We can empower them to do a lot of things if we provide them the resources.”

For more on women’s heart health, including in-depth review articles, check out issue 13.4 of the *Methodist DeBakey Cardiovascular Journal*: “Women and Heart Disease.”

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