



Well-Being

Skip the Mammogram? Not This Time

Joan Indiana Rigdon, 09.03.09, 4:00 PM ET

There are phone calls in your life that you'll always remember. I got one this past March, from my mom.

She's a perky octogenarian who walks everywhere and knows all the shopkeepers in her San Francisco neighborhood by first name. She's doesn't like to worry me, so over the years, she has let various medical maladies pass unannounced, until all is well. I've long suspected this, but had always assumed that if something serious happened, she'd let me know, or at least tell my brother, who lives with her, so he can tell me.

This time she was alarmingly forthright. She barely said hello before breaking the news.

"I have a medical problem," she said.

I didn't pause to imagine: I asked outright.

"Breast," she said.

I asked what her doctor said, and she replied that she had no doctor. She's retired and on Medicare, so she could have had a doctor, but hadn't felt the need, since her health had been relatively good, save periodic bouts of high blood pressure and kidney stones.

I asked how she knew she had breast cancer, and she told me that she had a lump that had grown quite large. How large, I wanted to know. As it turns out, she had watched it swell for two years, and had finally decided to mention it in March, because that's when it burst through her skin.

It's horrible to hear this from your mom under any circumstances, but especially hard when you live almost 3,000 miles away and have only managed to visit once every year or two. Somehow, during those visits, which usually involve meals out, a walk in the park and sightseeing, I'd failed to notice that she had no doctor.

Amazingly, this story has a happy ending, at least for now. Over phone and Internet, I quickly got my mom a primary care doctor and an appointment with a premier breast cancer clinic; then flew out to be with her for her mastectomy, which took place just days before her 83rd birthday. Although the cancer had spread to some lymph nodes, it had not metastasized. A post-operation CT scan showed no cancer, though there's a significant chance it will come back within 10 years.

Because of the type of cancer and her age, my mom was given the option of a daily hormonal pill instead of chemo or radiation. She chose the pill. It's hugely expensive but because of her low income, she gets it for only \$4 a month. For the moment, she's happy, healthy and cancer free.

I asked my mother why she had avoided mentioning the problem earlier.

She was afraid, she said. She didn't go to a doctor to find out if she had cancer because ... she was afraid she had cancer. She had seen her half-sister go through chemo, and had no desire to go through it herself.

Most of us wouldn't wait that long. But if you're like me, you let unpleasant necessities like mammograms slip. After my mother's jarring news, I called my own gynecologist for a referral. He'd given me a referral at my last check-up, but like many little pieces of paper in my life, it had disappeared.

The new referral arrived in the mail but got lost in one of those paper piles that my husband and I periodically shuffle out of the living area when we're expecting guests and hope to fool them into thinking that our house is normally clean.

I kept meaning to look for it, but I got busy with my mother, my own family, my life, my work.

At some point I asked for a replacement referral. It, too, promptly drowned in a paper sea that had crested over vacation. Luckily for me, it recently resurfaced.

So I called for an appointment. That's how I discovered that I've been much more negligent about getting my annual mammograms than I thought. In my mind, I was a year overdue, maybe two. As it turns out, although I get a pelvic exam each year, I haven't had a mammogram since spring of 2005.

Yet somehow, I've managed to remember to get my car's oil changed, almost always on time, quarter after quarter, year after year.

I'm not sure why I've been so much more responsible about my car than my breasts, but I plan to change that.

I'm going to put a reminder on my calendar for next year.

Maybe on my windshield, too.

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