

The DIPEX Charity, PO Box 428, Witney, Oxfordshire, OX28 9EU  
Tel: 01865 201330 Fax: 01865 289287 email: [info@dipex.org.uk](mailto:info@dipex.org.uk)

## **‘Pink breast cancer ribbon should have blue spot’ say men with the disease**

***Every man should be aware he could get breast cancer - and so should his friends, family, doctors, pharmacists and hospital receptionists.***

Many men with breast cancer suffer avoidable isolation and embarrassment and may delay going to the doctor because of the widespread belief that only women get the disease.

A new section on Breast Cancer in Men on the [www.healthtalkonline.org](http://www.healthtalkonline.org) website has shown that this commonly held view is a major challenge for many of the 300 men who are diagnosed with breast cancer every year in the UK. What’s more, this myth is compounded by hospital and GP leaflets *and* the annual Pink Ribbon October fund-raising campaign, according to some of the 33 men whose video and audio interviews appear on the new section.

‘The pinking of breast cancer has become the universal sign of support for breast cancer research in October - and that’s very understandable,’ said lead researcher, Professor Kate Hunt of the Medical Research Council’s Social & Public Health Sciences Unit in Glasgow. ‘But these interviews strongly suggest we need some blue in those pink bows to remind everyone - clinicians as well as the general public - that men get breast cancer too.’

One man, a 50-year-old lorry driver, describes on the site how he became a recluse after treatment, finding it hard to talk about his experiences even to close family. ‘How hard is it to put “men and women diagnosed with breast cancer (in patient leaflets)” ... just add that three letter word (men) ...and a small flash of pale blue (on the pink ribbons) they’re selling for a pound a time. Women get a lot of support when they get breast cancer ... I would have loved some of that support ... and a recognition that men need counselling too,’ he says.

The new section shows that many respondents - aged 40 upwards and from different parts of the UK - felt supported by friends and family in whom they confided. Others vividly describe having to manage other people’s responses including disbelief, embarrassment or in a few cases enduring ‘snide remarks’ - with one man finding it necessary to ‘challenge one man’s ignorance of breast cancer, pointing out that I’m no less of a man because I’ve had breast cancer ‘.

Another man describes having to open his shirt on a bus to convince a friend that he really did have a mastectomy scar. ‘I would probably say about 95 per cent of the people I spoke to were really surprised to find that as a man, I had got breast cancer,’ he says.

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Registered office: 41 Cornmarket Street, Oxford OX1 3HA  
Co-Founders: Dr Ann McPherson CBE and Dr Andrew Herxheimer  
Patrons: Jon Snow, Sir David Weatherall, Hugh Grant, Lord Turnberg  
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Others describe male friends or colleagues being embarrassed or even openly hostile when they talked about their experience. At the same time, many describe feelings of isolation and embarrassment as a result of being on the receiving end of health care geared entirely towards women - including ‘sticking out like a sore thumb’ in a ward full of women having chemotherapy, ‘a very female environment’.

Some men recall being addressed as Mrs rather than Mr when their names were called at a breast cancer clinic; another got a ‘funny look’ from a pharmacist when collecting a prescription for the breast cancer drug, tamoxifen.

But the new section scotches the myth that men universally put off seeing their doctor for as long as possible. Many contributors describe making an appointment to see their GP at their first sighting of a symptom. Those that put off seeing their doctor were normally unaware that men should be concerned about changes to their breast.

Robert, who didn’t talk to anyone about the lump in his breast for several months, says: ‘I never thought it could be cancer until it gradually got bigger and I sometimes felt an odd sensation’. Mohammad also ignored a lump until he found a large bloodstain on his vest - which his doctor initially thought was an infection.

‘One of the key messages for men from this research has to be that it is legitimate to go to the GP with any worries about your breast or your nipple,’ says Professor Hunt. ‘Breast cancer in men is rare but it does happen.’

The new site also pinpoints the differences and the similarities in the experiences of men and women with breast cancer. On the one hand, men describe sharing some negative experiences of breast cancer with women including having hot flushes, loss of libido and weight gain on tamoxifen, having to ‘fight’ to get the relatively new breast cancer drug, Herceptin and developing lymphoedema after surgery.

But contributors also point to the lack of choice in the treatment they receive as a result of having a disease that is regarded as ‘rare’ and has received less attention from researchers than breast cancer in women. One man said: ‘You listen to them (women with breast cancer) talking. “Oh, what kind of trial are you on?” “Oh, I’m on this trial” and “oh, I’m on this trial.” “Oh, I’m not having radiotherapy, I’m just trying this chemo.” I’m going hold on a minute, what’s going on here? I were just told that I would be having a full operation, full mastectomy, I would be on chemotherapy and I would be on radiation treatment. There were no mentions of trials..... weren’t a choice for me. I were just told.’

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And while complementary therapy is popular with women with breast cancer, only a small number of men were interested, though this included one man who bought £1000 worth of crystals in an attempt to stimulate white blood cells.

**Note for editors:**

[www.healthtalkonline.org](http://www.healthtalkonline.org) is an experiential website based on qualitative research led by experts at the University of Oxford and published by the DIPEX charity. It is funded by a wide range of statutory bodies and charitable trusts is recognised by the Department of Health and many other professional organisations.

The website which recently celebrated its tenth anniversary has more than a million hits a week and two million unique visitors every year. They log on to watch video and audio clips from interviews with around 2000 people about their experience of more than 60 conditions.

The new section, funded by the Medical Research Council can be viewed on:

[http://www.healthtalkonline.org/Cancer/breast\\_cancer\\_in\\_men](http://www.healthtalkonline.org/Cancer/breast_cancer_in_men)

Interviews with some participants can be arranged.

**For further information, please contact Alan Murray: [alan@murraypr.com](mailto:alan@murraypr.com)**

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