

PREVENTION IS PREFERABLE

by Apryl Allen

When lightning strikes, it's unexpected, and the thunderous drum that follows sends you running for shelter to avoid being struck — prevention. This is the reality of — ahem — a cancer diagnosis. After the initial shock subsides you find yourself asking the question: Is there something I could have done that would have prevented this?

In 2013 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Thankfully, due to all the research and new technology, we were able to detect it early, allowing me to return to the life I love and adore. But I can't help but pose the question: Why aren't we searching for a way to prevent the disease? Instead, we are on, what appears to be, an endless search for a cure.

In the modern version of the Hippocratic Oath it states: "I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure." It seems so simple really, looking for a way to deter a catastrophic health misfortune. Instead, the reality of our health coverage is it will only cover procedures after you've been diagnosed with a potentially terminal disease.

Prior to my surgery, I was told I should have a BRCA genetics test completed. This would tell my doctors whether I am at high risk for breast and ovarian cancer. Should I test positive for either gene, it would be in my best interest to have a double mastectomy, and possibly a preventive oophorectomy (surgical removal of my ovaries) to reduce my risk factor, thus preventing another bout with cancer. Of course, because I was diagnosed with cancer, this test and the surgeries would be covered by my insurance. Fortunately, I tested negative and opted for a lumpectomy and, due to one lymph node involvement, a lymph node dissection.

Surprisingly, more than 20 years since the BRCA gene discovery in 1994, preventative surgeries of this nature are not covered by health insurance. Meaning, if an individual who is cancer free chooses to have this genetic test, because a close relative has had breast, ovarian, or prostate cancer, they will be denied coverage. Still, as a preventative measure, some people choose to have the test and pay out-of-pocket (no, this money will not go towards your in- or out-of-network deductibles). If they test positive for the gene and choose to have preventative surgery they're told their insurance will not cover this procedure either. Yes, that's correct, our health care system "prefers" a diagnosis of cancer first. Whoever made this rule must

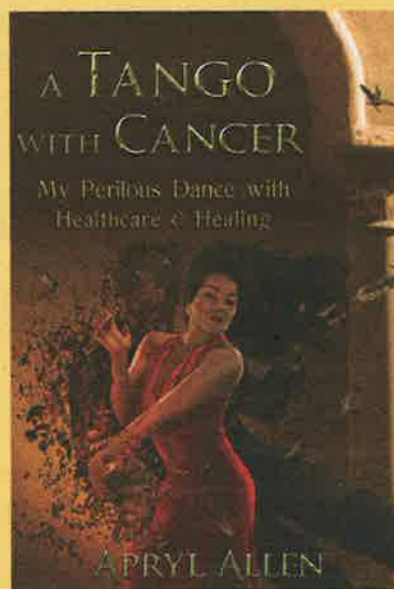


have remembered the Hippocratic Oath backwards.

Would you be shocked to know not all people play by these same rules? I was speaking with an acquaintance, who's a judge, about how wonderful her doctor is because he practices preventative care. Both her mother and aunt had been diagnosed with breast cancer in the past and because of this he was recommending she have a BRCA genetics test completed. Of course I informed her she would have to pay for the test and, should she test positive, would have to pay for the surgery, too — if she was so inclined.

"Pshaw!" was her flighty response as she filled me in on the punch line. "Because I'm a government employee all tests and surgeries are covered by my insurance — it's considered preventative care. My heart sank. In truth, "We The People" are the ones paying for her tests, and for Congress and their family members, too. Where's the equality here?"

My heart literally ached for all those who are denied coverage simply because they are attempting to be proactive and avoid what could potentially become a life-threatening event. And what about their families? This has consequences that go beyond that of the individual.



Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting if you test positive for this gene you should have surgery. Had I tested positive, and because I have no children, I would be willing to gamble and choose not to have surgery. However, if I had children that would be a completely different debate — at least for me. But shouldn't we have the opportunity to choose prevention? I can assure you, at this stage its preferable to a cure.

Apryl Allen is the author of *A Tango with Cancer: My Perilous Dance with Healthcare and Healing* (October 13, 2016).

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www.aprylallen.com