

until there's

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENOIT CORTET

a cure

PRINCETON SURGEON, DR. RACHEL DULTZ

The little pink ribbon symbolizing the fight against breast cancer has found its way into so many facets of society that it's hard to believe the idea was initially a tough sell. Nancy Brinker, who pioneered the concept of cause-related marketing with the iconic image, faced resistance from potential sponsors squeamish about being associated with cancer, especially cancer of the *breast*. "Papers didn't want to print the words 'breast cancer,' so it was very much an uphill battle," recalled Brinker when she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Barack Obama this August.





cancer that had become her passion. “There were lots of excellent surgeons but none dedicated solely to women with breast cancer,” she recalls in an interview in the spa-like new facility on Princeton Hightstown Road. “It was then the case for surgeons to operate on whatever came along, anything from a gall bladder to a hernia. I had come to appreciate the need for a dedicated surgical focus. So for me, this was the perfect place to be since it didn’t have what I had to offer and I developed my own niche.”

Among the first to welcome the new surgeon was a jubilant Nancy Healey, Executive Director of Susan G. Komen For the Cure Central and South Jersey (the name changed from Susan G. Komen Foundation in 2007), and organizer of the recent Six Flags run. Healey had already survived two bouts of breast cancer and was only too well aware of the need for a special focus on breast health: “Someone called our office to tell me of this *phenomenal* breast surgeon. I was immediately impressed by Rachel’s passion and commitment. Eleven years later and she is still the same. She gets to know her patients, visits them on weekends, gives them her cell phone number so that they can call her 24/7, and gives them hope and encouragement.”

Focusing on Complete Health Care

Dultz, who recently became the first physician on the board of Komen’s Central and South Jersey affiliate, always knew she would be a doctor, even though there were no doctors in her family and her only role model was her pediatrician. At UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Brunswick she discovered the challenges of surgery: “Tackling a physical problem with your hands and fixing it in the operating room offers almost immediate gratification and that’s what drove me to become a surgeon.”

As is typical for surgeons-in-training, the aim is to gain as much expertise as possible in as little time as possible, operating on whatever needs to be done, in swift succession. The focus is on the operation at hand rather than on the individual on the

Times Have Changed

Thanks to Brinker and the organization she founded in response to her sister Suzy Komen’s untimely death (at age 36 in 1980), millions of breast cancer survivors take part each year in Race for the Cure events all over the world.

The 14th annual Race for the Cure took place at Six Flags Great Adventure this month. As usual, Princeton physician Rachel Dultz was among the runners. “Patients are so appreciative when their doctors come out to show their support and I am thrilled to see them waving. In a way, it’s also humbling,” she says. “I haven’t

“tackling a problem and fixing it in the operating room offers almost immediate gratification and that’s what drove me to become a surgeon...”

experienced what they’ve gone through and yet there they are after chemotherapy or surgery...”

The race unites Dr. Dultz’s twin passions: for running and for her work as Medical Director of the University Medical Center at Princeton’s new Breast Health Center in East Windsor.

The Center is the culmination of a long-held goal for Dultz and others. But it didn’t happen overnight.

In 1998, when Dultz joined the University Medical Center at Princeton, she was the only surgeon trained exclusively in breast surgical oncology. Fresh from a Fellowship at Baylor University in Dallas, Texas, she was struck by the Princeton area’s lack of the sort of complete health care focus on women with breast

table. Like any young resident, Dultz set out to gain as much surgical expertise as possible. She began to feel, however, that something was missing from the picture. “I wanted to be part of a more complete process,” she recalls. “There is nothing better than being a doctor; the hard part is choosing which kind of doctor to be.”

That choice became a little easier when Dultz met the woman surgeon who became her mentor: “Irene Wapnir was a wonderful doctor and surgeon. Not only did she operate, she sat down with her patients, got to know them and their families and really took care of them. She saw them through diagnosis, surgery and post-surgical treatment. In her I observed a complete doctor in a

surgeon’s package and that appealed to me.”

With the goal of learning how to take complete care of a patient with breast cancer, Dultz sought specialist training only to discover a dearth of programs. As a measure of how much has changed in little over a decade, Dultz had two programs to choose from in 1997, now there are some 30. At Baylor University in Dallas, Dultz found a “wonderful, very progressive, warm, caring environment.” (Incidentally, it was also in Dallas, in 1982, that Nancy Brinker launched Komen from her living room.) At Baylor, Dultz worked with breast cancer surgeons and learned the value of communication among all of the disciplines (medical oncologists, radiation oncologists, and plastic surgeons) that come together in treatment.

Breast Health Center

Following the lead of its Medical Director, the recently opened 8,000 square foot facility takes a pro-active approach to breast health and to breast cancer, now the second leading cause of death in women. “With no guaranteed way to prevent breast cancer



Star-Struck Surgeon: In 2007, actress Jamie Lee Curtis (above right) was the keynote speaker at the Princeton HealthCare System’s annual Women’s Conference. No one was more excited than Princeton surgeon Rachel Dultz, who admits to being the sort of “Hollywood junkie” who fits in as many star sightings as possible when attending medical conferences in California. Dr. Dultz (shown opposite page indulging in her favorite sport) advocates running to her patients and takes part in annual Race For the Cure events. When not in the operating room at the University Medical Center at Princeton, Dultz takes care of her patients at the UMCP’s new Breast Health Center in East Windsor (left and following page).

at this time, early detection is essential, which is why regular mammograms are so important,” says Dultz. “The mission of anyone who takes care of women with breast cancer is to totally get rid of it. Until we reach that point, early detection is what saves lives and that’s what we promote here.”

The Center offers advanced technologies, genetic counseling, and breast health education programs. Certified nurses (known as Breast Health Navigators) provide one-on-one support from diagnosis through treatment and coordination of follow-up consultations for surgery, radiation, chemotherapy, plastic surgery or other specialized breast-related care.

“For a long time, the technology relating to breast cancer was stagnant,” says Dultz. “Then along came digital mammography offering improved detection and, with no film to develop, communication as fast as the doctor can get to a computer. A patient can have a mammogram at the Center and I can look at it over in Princeton and speak to the patient right away if need be. I know that patients sit on pins and needles waiting for results so as soon as I know, I call and get them into the office as quickly as possible to give them the information they need to make informed decisions.”

Enhanced speed is at the core of many of the Center’s techniques. Image-guided biopsies allow areas to be targeted under local anesthesia and the less invasive out-patient procedure, which can reveal abnormalities that cannot be felt, takes less than an hour. Although Dultz reports that about 80 percent of biopsies are benign, there is always a degree of anxiety associated with diagnostic testing.

To promote an ambience of tranquility, a welcoming cascade of water screens the Center’s entryway and the soft furnishings are in muted earth tones. Electronic records and a self-check in allow the Center to be almost entirely paperless and having everything on one (ground) floor promotes communication between nurses, technicians, radiologists, physicians, and patients. The fact that all of the above, as well as members of the UMCP Auxiliary and representatives from the local community, were involved in refining the Center’s design has a lot to do with the look and feel of the place.

The main waiting room is large enough for family and friends while another for patients is smaller, more private, with a television, water cooler, and magazines (one’s you’d actually want to read), lockers, spacious and bright changing rooms, and cloth rather than flimsy paper gowns. The multi-purpose space allows for after hours use for community education programs.

Only operating room procedures are carried out at the hospital since the inclusion of an O.R. was considered prohibitively costly, especially with the new hospital going up nearby in Plainsboro.

“None of this would have been possible without the UMCP Medical Auxiliary,” says Dultz. The Auxiliary focused its fundraising efforts on the Center for several years and raised some \$1.6 million via ArtFirst!, November Night, and other events.

Located within easy access of Princeton, the facility serves growing populations on the east side of Route 1 as well as Jamesburg and Monroe’s over 55 retirement communities. Parking is plentiful and there’s a shuttle from the hospital.

Dultz’s own solo private practice moved into the building in January, a “natural progression after ten years in practice with other surgeons,” she says. To handle her multiple responsibilities, Dultz starts her day at around 4:45 a.m. with a 5-mile run around her Pennington neighborhood. After hospital rounds, she’s usually at her desk before 7 a.m. planning the day ahead (typically a 12-14 hour workday).

Running for the Cure

Besides her work, Dultz’s passion is running, a means to better physical and psychological health for herself and for her patients: “When I can do both, I’m happy,” she says, adding that patients do better with a positive outlook that comes from physical exercise.

Unlike many of the known cancer risks, which are not modifiable (age, family history, age at first full-term pregnancy, early menarche, late menopause), factors such as weight gain and obesity, alcohol intake, and physical activity *are* modifiable, which is one of the reasons Dultz advocates running to her patients and takes part in the annual Race for the Cure. In 2005, she ran Doctors for the Cure, and received Komen NJ’s Spirit of Jane Rodney Award.

“With no guaranteed way to prevent breast cancer at this time, **regular mammograms are crucial.**”

Healthcare and Obama

When it comes to the current health care debate, Dultz admits to mixed feelings. “Health care has made tremendous strides for women with breast cancer but what is still needed is greater access to screening mammography.” Her hope is that President Obama won’t undo what has already been done or limit patient access to specialists. Her fear is that healthcare will become a factory-like process. “Doctors need to be able to afford to stay in business, pay their staff and provide health benefits for them as well as pay for medical malpractice insurance. We want to take care of patients and that takes time and attention.”

When Nancy Brinker launched Komen, there were no 800-numbers, no websites, little government support for breast cancer research, and few major breast cancer centers.

Dedicated doctors like Rachel P. Dultz continue to be at the forefront of change for the better.

For More Information

UMCP Breast Health Center, East Windsor Medical Commons 2, 300 B Princeton Hightstown Road, East Windsor; (609) 688-2730.

For comprehensive cancer information, visit the American Cancer Society Web Site at www.cancer.org or call the American Cancer Society; 1-800-ACS-2345.

Susan G. Komen For the Cure is the world’s largest grass-roots network of breast cancer survivors, with over 120 affiliates in the United States including The Central and South Jersey Affiliate of Susan G. Komen For the Cure, 2 Princess Road, Suite D, Lawrenceville, NJ 08648; 609-896-1201; info@komencsnj.org. ■

