

A Breast Cancer Survivor from North Carolina Speaks Out Against “Drive-Through” Mastectomies

By Alva Williams, Jacksonville, N.C.

About two years ago, I had a “drive-through” mastectomy. I left my house for my surgery at sunrise and was back home before sundown. I was not given the option of staying in the hospital. When I went to schedule my surgery, I was told by my surgeon’s office that my health insurance would not cover a hospital stay. So my mastectomy was scheduled as an outpatient procedure at the New Bern Surgical Center in New Bern, North Carolina.

My older sister, Nell, who is 73 years old, and her husband, Charlie, an 80-year-old retired Chief Hospital Corpsman who served in WWII, Korea and Vietnam, live in Georgia and came to take care of me. On the morning of my surgery, Nell drove me to the surgery center, approximately 37 miles from my house. We didn’t know how I would feel after the surgery and if I would need to lay down in the backseat, so Charlie and my husband, Larry, as well as three of my children followed us. We joked that we were a caravan.

My surgery seemed to go well. When I got home, I stayed on the sofa in our den. I didn’t want to be away from my family. I had never been so scared in my life and I didn’t want anyone to know how terrified I was. I was used to always taking care of them, not the other way around. I was in shock – my God, my entire breast had just been removed! I felt like a butchered animal. And though my family really wanted to be there for me, they really couldn’t understand all of the feelings that I was going through. I just wished that I had been in the hospital, so I could have shared my fears with a doctor or a nurse.

Even though I was lucky enough to have my family there to take care of me and they tried their best, I really needed expert medical care, especially during the first couple of days following my surgery.

The worst part was emptying the drainage tubes. These tubes hung from my chest to my knees. Terrified that I’d catch them on something, I ended up wearing my husband’s pajama pants and tucking them into there. We had to empty the drains and then measure and record the bloody fluid. Though Charlie was a retired Navy medic, he couldn’t handle doing this. That left my husband Larry, a washer and dryer repairman without a medical bone in his body, to try. God bless him. As he struggled to get the gloves over his big hands, he proceeded to empty the drains. However, we later found out that poor Larry had been combining the amount of fluid, rather than measuring each drain individually.

I ended up getting a staph infection and had to seek medical help from Dr. Turlington, my primary care physician in Jacksonville. He cleaned the site, taught my husband how to change the dressings and put me on heavy antibiotics. In about two weeks, the infection started to heal. My oncologist told me he could not begin the chemotherapy treatments until the infected site was completely healed. In the end, I was six weeks late starting my chemotherapy.

I just thank the Good Lord everyday for Dr. Turlington; this man saved my life! He is not only my family doctor, but also a very close friend who lives just up the street. Not everyone in my situation is fortunate enough to have a doctor close by.

I never thought this could happen to me. It's not right for an insurance company to dictate how a physician must treat a patient. I pay for health insurance to protect myself, in case the worst happens. And when it did happen to me, I found out just how little coverage I really had. And I didn't know the right questions to ask. I just found out from Lifetime that my state, North Carolina, has a law on the books to prevent "drive-through" mastectomies, but unfortunately, it did not protect me.

I hope that my story makes a difference. I really want to help other women and make sure that they get the expert medical care and attention they need and deserve. I signed Lifetime's petition to end "drive-through" mastectomies. I know now that I am not alone. My signature is just one of more than 20 million. Lifetime has collected. That means that I am not the only one who cares and has had this happen to them. I urge Congress to pass the Breast Cancer Patient Protection Act of 2007. Unfortunately, one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her life. Please make sure that others don't have to experience a "drive-through" mastectomy.