

Opinion: Dying for a cure for metastatic breast cancer

By Kelly Shanahan

Sometimes it takes an earthquake to wake you up. My personal earthquake jolted me on Nov. 14, 2013, when I was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. My carefully constructed world came crumbling down; I could no longer perform surgery, the core of my life as an ob-gyn; the plans for eventually retiring and traveling blew away like dust in the wind; and, most devastating, there loomed the real possibility I would not live to see my daughter, the light of my life, graduate from high school.



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Metastatic breast cancer means that rogue cancer cells escape the breast and take up residence elsewhere in the body. There is no cure and less than a quarter of those diagnosed live five years. No one dies from early stage cancer, yet less than 7 percent of cancer research dollars is devoted to metastatic research. That 7 percent figure covers all types of advanced cancer. In October, everywhere you look there is pink, but little if any of those pink ribbon products do anything to actually find a cure for a disease that kills 40,000 American women and men every year – 108 wives, mothers, sisters, brothers, fathers, and, yes, doctors every single day.

I've never been average and I plan to beat the statistical

average life expectancy after a diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer, because 32 months just isn't long enough to accomplish everything I am meant to do. I haven't finished my job as a mom or a wife. I am passionate about bringing attention to and increasing funding for metastatic breast cancer research.

The latter is why I'm writing this in LAX, on my way to Washington, D.C., to lie down in front of the Capitol to draw attention to metastatic breast cancer. MET-UP is an organization founded by fellow "lifers", women (and men) like me who are living with metastatic breast cancer, knowing that unless more is done, we will die long before we should. Modeled on ACT UP, the activist movement born of the AIDs crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s, this group is designed to shake things up and demand action. Our first action is a "die-in" on Oct. 13, Metastatic Breast Cancer Awareness Day, the one day out of 31 devoted to the only breast cancer that actually kills.

I won't just be lying on the Capitol lawn: I'll also be meeting with Sen. Barbara Boxer's staff to discuss what can be done to further research into metastatic cancers. Federal funding for cancer research has been cut, and even if further money cannot be obtained, redistribution of current cancer research dollars to metastatic research can make a huge difference. The SEER database, run by the National Cancer Institute, collects information on cancer diagnosis in the U.S., but SEER does not gather data on conversion from early stage to metastatic cancer. Without such basic information, it is impossible to accurately gauge the extent of metastatic disease or know whether current treatments improve life expectancy. Ideally, with more information and more research, one day there will be a cure for the only breast cancer that kills, metastatic breast cancer.

When the earthquake strikes, the survival instinct kicks in. You will claw your way out of the rubble to see the light of another day. You will kiss your family goodbye and fly 2,500

miles across the country to meet with others who have experienced the same upheaval in their lives. You will join hands and lie down to honor the 40,000 who have died every year over the past 30 years, a number that has not decreased despite all the awareness and the pink. You will do this in front of the Capitol, to demand action because those of us living with metastatic disease deserve more; we deserve the chance to see another sunrise, to cheer at a graduation, cry at a wedding, and maybe even hold a grandchild's hand. On Oct. 13 be aware that we are, quite literally, dying for a cure.

Kelly Shanahan is a 21-year resident of South Lake Tahoe and the owner of Emerald Bay Center for Women's Health. She has been living with metastatic breast cancer for nearly two years. A mom, a wife, an active member of our community, she continues to work part time as a gynecologist.