Breast Cancer: The Value and Meaning of Breasts

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Abstract

Understanding the value and meaning of the female breast for women with breast cancer and their partners can assist health professionals in understanding how a woman may react to breast cancer and surgery and enable appropriate interventions to be implemented. One in eleven women in Australia will develop breast cancer by the age of 75. According to Spiegal as many as 80% of breast cancer patients may report significant psychological distress during their initial treatment. Based on the most recent national data about 10,000 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year. On this basis approximately 8,000 women may report significant distress. This distress can result from anxiety about recurrence, threats to sexuality and occupation. A woman’s health, everyday activities, self-esteem, sexuality and relationships may all be affected as a result of this distress causing them to feel helpless and powerless. Why does breast cancer have such an impact on women? It stems back to the value and meaning that the female breast has in society and culture. This article reviews the historical and contemporary perspective of the value and meaning of breasts and application to health care.

Introduction

“The chest, the house of the heart, is an important centre of a person’s being. I may locate my consciousness in my head, but myself, my existence as a solid person in the world, starts from my chest, from which I feel my self rise and radiate.” (Young, 1992:215).

The female breast has both symbolic and functional meanings. In one sense breasts have come to symbolise motherhood, beauty, self-esteem, body image and femininity. They provide visible evidence of femininity, sexuality and desire. Breasts also serve as a source of nourishment for the young. The female breast is one of the first signs that children use to differentiate male from female. Because female breasts have this dual meaning and value they contribute to a woman’s body image and confidence on personal, social and societal levels. The loss of a breast can have devastating psychological effects on a woman, including self-consciousness, insecurity, inferiority and fear of undesirability.

Historical perspective

Historical research has traced the ways in which both sensuality and functionality have contributed to the meaning and value of the female breast. In literature, art and religion female breasts are more commonly portrayed as objects of sensuality and desire. For example, Shakespeare and Joyce frequently mention women’s breasts in their works, referring to the sensuous desire associated with them. De Mondeville, a 12th Century philosopher (1260-1320), philosophises that women’s breasts show the quality of virtuousness, graciousness and gentleness of a woman’s image of femininity and motherhood, and a woman’s integrity of purity.

In European art galleries and churches women’s breasts are more commonly portrayed in paintings and statues as items of desire than as functional organs (or glands). See, for example, the statue Venus de Milo (c.100BC), Botticelli’s (1444-1510) The Birth of Venus, and Ruben’s (1577-1640) War and Peace. Each of these portray the beauty of the perfect nude female body. Artemis of Ephesus is an ornate image of the goddess of nature and a symbol of fertility. She has 17 swollen breasts and, clearly, the breasts are the symbol of this fertility. In the Bible, King Solomon sings to his beloved “Your two breasts are like two fawns, like twin fawns of a gazelle that browse among the lilies” (Song of Solomon 4:5).

The significance of the amputation of breasts, which during the middle ages was used as a form of punishment, is also portrayed in art. This can be seen in the story of Agatha, Patron Saint of breast diseases. Agatha (who later became St Agatha) lived in the city of Catania in Sicily at the time Quintiuswas Governor. She was a very beautiful virgin woman. Quintius noticed her beauty and vigorously sought her favour. Agatha was committed to her beliefs and did not respond favourably to the advances of the older Roman governor. This enraged Quintius to the point where he threatened her with mutilation of her body. When this did not produce the expected outcome, he condemned her to be bound to a martyr stake and have both breasts “torn off”. St Agatha is preserved in paintings as a martyr, enduring suffering while her breasts are being torn or cut off. She is often portrayed in paintings carrying her breasts on a platter. Her story depicts the sadness women feel with the amputation of breasts. Quintius’ assault of this woman’s breasts was an attack on Agatha’s fertility and femininity. A woman maimed, rendered unattractive and unable to rear young, was inferior to other women in society. This form of punishment of women continued throughout the middle ages. Women who committed certain crimes were punished by the removal of one or both breasts. Male domination of women was perpetuated through threats to this sacred part of a woman’s body rendering her both dysfunctional as a mother and undesirable to men.

Contemporary meaning

Body image is developed during the first 12 years of life, according to Finn, Young and the World Health Organisation. During this time of developing body image, young girls are growing up with their cultural and societal values. It is during this time that women are influenced by fashion, magazines, advertisements, clothing designs, music and movies. The meaning and value of women’s breasts in this post-modern and post-feminist era varies from woman to woman. Contemporary value and meaning of women’s breasts remain to be sensuality, nurturing and femininity. Women’s magazines and fashion constantly reflect these themes.

Post-feminism has enabled a diversity of meaning attributed to the value and meaning of the female breast among women. For example, it may be important for a woman who has had breast surgery to have reconstructive surgery at the time of operation to maintain the value attributed to her breast, while another woman may be very content to have both breasts removed with no need for prostheses. Contemporary meanings reflect the postmodern thinking of today’s society reinforcing contemporary values and meanings attributed to the breast.

Summary

Throughout history, in literature, art, religion and in contemporary Australian society, breasts have a dual meaning. On one hand they have come to symbolise femininity and sensuality. On the other hand, they function to support life of the young. The amputation of a breast or breasts can alter the body image of the woman. A diagnosis of breast cancer and its...
associated treatments pose this same threat but also imposes changes in lifestyle.

**Implications for practice**

By showing an understanding of personal, cultural and societal values and meanings of the female breast, health care providers show their interest in providing care in context with their population of patients. This principle of contextual care goes beyond breast cancer and women, to those in need of any health intervention, regardless of race, culture or gender. Caring with such empathy and understanding the “person on the mattress” perspective, may improve health outcomes and increase job satisfaction. Providing individualised treatment and care for each woman is of paramount importance. Health professionals should assess each woman’s value and meaning of their breasts before treatment and offer appropriate treatment and support for each woman and their partner. Research is needed in this area.

**References**