



Stamp Act

The story behind the breast cancer research stamp

by Ernie Bodai, MD

In 1996 I was preparing a lecture on the history of breast cancer when a thought occurred—*wouldn't it be great to have a stamp addressing breast cancer?* Moments later, another thought—*wouldn't it be even better to have a postage stamp, priced slightly higher than a first-class stamp, with the extra monies raised directed to breast cancer research?*

The more I thought about the idea, the more sense it made. A breast cancer research stamp made particular sense in light of the fact that while the cost of research had consistently increased; the funding for research had begun to decline. For example, in the 1990s nearly 70 percent of all research proposals received funding; by the early 2000s less than 25 percent of all proposals were funded.

A quick analysis of the United States Postal Service in 1996 revealed that 180 billion pieces of mail were handled. One-third of these items used a 32-cent stamp. If half of those stamps were sold at 33 cents, \$300 million would be generated annually, nearly equaling the entire National Cancer Institute's budget for breast cancer research.

I contacted the Postmaster General about the idea for a breast cancer research stamp and received a swift and terse reply—NO! This could not happen as the United States Postal Service is not a fundraising organization. Another concern was that creating a breast cancer research stamp would open a "Pandora's Box," leading to many other causes approaching the Postal Service with similar requests.

I quickly realized that it would take an Act of Congress to convince the United States Postal Service that a breast cancer research stamp would be a worthwhile undertaking. I wrote to the every female then serving in

the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives. Receiving not one reply, I purchased an airline ticket to Washington, D.C. My mission: to find out why no one had responded to my letters.

As I began to walk the halls of Congress, something interesting happened. Every legislative assistant for healthcare issues of the legislators to whom I'd written had a copy of my letter. Apparently making a personal appearance made a difference. I was not some "quack" with outlandish ideas. All I wanted was a fundraising stamp to underwrite research for breast cancer. Without realizing it, I had become a lobbyist—and an effective one at that. In early 1996, after several trips to Washington, the first House bill HR3401 was introduced by then Congressman Vic Fazio (D-CA). The Senate version of the bill, S726, was introduced by Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA). But 1996 was an election year, Congress adjourned in early summer, and our bills were among the discarded potential legislation.

Is there a doctor in the House?

We spent the time between the summer of 1996 and the start of the new legislative session in January 1997 preparing our "strategic plan" to return to Washington and begin again. Some 250,000 signatures were gathered and mailed to Congress as a grassroots support effort. Numerous prestigious organizations, including the American College of Surgeons, the National Cancer Registrars Association, and the American Medical Association, were recruited to write letters of endorsement. In 1997, a series of new bills were introduced, again by then Congressman Fazio and Senator Feinstein, and later by then Congresswoman Susan Molinari (R-NY).

On July 28, at 10 p.m., the gavel in the House of Representatives was struck. I was sitting high in the viewing area of the House when the vote on HR 1585, the "Stamp Out Breast Cancer Act," was tallied. The bill passed 422-3. The following day, Senator Feinstein introduced an identical bill on the Senate floor where it passed unanimously. President Clinton signed the bill into law (PL 105-41) the following week.

We had a law! Now all we needed was a stamp. The United States Postal Service engaged Ethel Kessler to design the stamp using an illustration by Whitney Sherman.

The breast cancer research stamp was issued on July 29, 1998, becoming the first "semi-postal" stamp in U.S. history.

Today, close to 600,000 stamps have been sold, raising nearly \$50 million for breast cancer research. In fact, the breast cancer research stamp has become one of the highest selling stamps in history.

Currently, the breast cancer research stamp law is "sun-setted," which means that the stamp is only mandated for two years at a time. Three extensions have made the stamp available through December 2005. Of course, we will return again ask for a further extension and, hopefully, a final bill, which would grant the stamp a lifetime of invulnerability.

Our next challenge is a "global journey" to raise this incredible stamp to the international level. No less than 20 countries have already expressed an interest in pursuing such an endeavor. Our goal is to have a breast cancer research stamp in every committed nation by 2006. Our goal is to find the cure for breast cancer. ■

Ernie Bodai, MD, is director, Breast Surgical Service, Kaiser Permanente in Sacramento, Calif.