



Fairness

Lee E. Mortenson

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FROM THE EDITOR



Fairness

by Lee E. Mortenson, D.P.A.

What happened recently to Dr. Bernard Fisher has stimulated much discussion in the cancer community about fairness. Appropriately so.

From the media and Capitol Hill, we have heard anger. Dr. Fisher, the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project (NSABP), and the National Cancer Institute (NCI)—all those guys in white coats—have been lying to us, endangering our lives, keeping secrets, and defrauding us. Headlines have blared: “Women should be afraid!” “Trials stopped!” Anger and finger pointing. And yes, heads have rolled.

Within the cancer community, however, the mood of the conversation has been sadness more than anger. Fairness is recognized as more subtle here. The bad guys portrayed in the media are guys we know. And we know that the cartoon caricatures are wildly exaggerated. As the facts emerge, it is becoming clear that the results of the research do hold up, although some things could have been done better and quicker.

But on the cancer community airwaves, most of the discussion centers on the precipitous removal of Dr. Fisher from head of the NSABP. Two weeks after the “controversy” appeared in the media, NCI removed Dr. Fisher as head of his group. Two weeks! Merely a sound bite of time.

Perhaps it was important for the press. Perhaps it was important to show Congressman Dingell a head on a platter or the breast cancer advocates that NCI is responsive. Perhaps in the long run, intensive research will show shocking things about NSABP research.

Let's be realistic. Most of us believe that research has been steadily improving over the years and is

increasing in sophistication and validation. We know that everything done in the past could have been done “better,” and most of us believe that it is extremely unlikely that any amount of dirt-finding is going to change the results of the groundbreaking work done by Dr. Fisher and the NSABP. We all know the NSABP—its warts and its beauty—because we are all the NSABP.

So, when we see what was done to Dr. Fisher, fairness leaps to mind. Here is the giant who built NSABP out of his own will and determination. Here is the man who convinced surgeons who didn't want to participate to participate. Here is the man who campaigned across the nation to involve enough of us to answer crucial questions that improved breast cancer management for women throughout the country. This is a man who has been a women's health and choice advocate for decades. His efforts have altered cancer care in a way that few others could have done. Bernie Fisher did things for us that we couldn't do ourselves.

Now, of course, we don't know the whole story. But it seems unlikely to me, and I'll bet to you, that when we hear it we will be shocked. We are going to have to look at all the people at NCI and on the Hill, and among the outraged, and ask them if, on balance, the sacrifice of Dr. Fisher was merited and fair.

Those of us who know the work that he has done for men and women with cancer and their families know that it is the work of a giant! We also know that he is human and imperfect. My guess is that when the day is done, you and I with sadness in our eyes will shake our heads. How easy it is to set aside the achievements of this extraordinary man. When it comes to fairness, this sad episode becomes an ugly lesson about what we can expect from our leadership. ■