Game-Changing Study for Early-Stage Breast Cancer

The Trial Assigning Individualized Options for Treatment (TAILORx) trial, supported by the National Cancer Institute, opened in 2006 and was designed to determine whether hormone therapy alone is inferior to hormone therapy plus chemotherapy when it comes to treating certain kinds of breast cancer.

The results came in this summer as part of the American Society of Clinical Oncologists (ASCO) annual conference. TAILORx results showed that 70% of women with early stage breast cancers that are HER2 negative and are sensitive to estrogen will not benefit from chemotherapy and can safely avoid its toxic side effects.

"The new results from TAILORx give clinicians high-quality data to inform personalized treatment recommendations for women," said lead author Joseph A. Sparano, M.D., associate director for clinical research at the Albert Einstein Cancer Center and Montefiore Health System. "These data confirm that using a 21-gene expression test to assess the risk of cancer recurrence can spare women unnecessary treatment if the test indicates that chemotherapy is not likely to provide benefit."

TAILORx was one of the first large-scale trials to examine a methodology for personalizing cancer treatment and is the largest adjuvant breast cancer treatment trial ever completed. It relied on the 21-gene Oncotype DX Breast Recurrence Score test to more precisely define the benefit of chemotherapy, if any, in early-stage breast cancer.

For more information, visit YouTube and search "TAILORx study"
Each year in the spring, VBCF advocates join others from around the country for an annual Lobby Day organized by the National Breast Cancer Coalition (NBCC) in Washington, D.C. One of our most important objectives that day is to urge our representatives in Congress to support continued funding for the Department of Defense Breast Cancer Research Program (DoD BCRP). I’d like to share why the BCRP is so important for anyone affected by breast cancer, as well as a bit about my own involvement in the program as an advocate, and encourage others to consider participation.

Background & Benefits
The DoD BCRP was established in 1993 through the determined efforts of advocates. The main concept behind it is that if we are going to achieve real breakthroughs against this disease, we need to find a way to provide funding for the most promising higher-risk, yet higher-reward, types of research projects that wouldn’t otherwise get funded. The program is special in many ways:

- It doesn’t duplicate other federal funding for breast cancer research. Most years, it has operated with a budget of $120 million to $150 million. In comparison, the National Cancer Institute allocates about $600 million per year to breast cancer research.

- The role of advocates is an extremely important part of the process. I’ve had the honor to participate as a “consumer reviewer,” along with scientists and physicians, on a number of panels reviewing research proposals for the program over the last ten years. Consumer reviewers evaluate each proposal from the perspective of patient impact. We only rate highly those proposals that, if successful, would truly make a difference for patients by saving lives or improving quality of life. Being on a panel is challenging work but incredibly rewarding and a great learning experience. And I’ve found the scientists on the panels to be highly appreciative of the advocates’ input.

- It is efficient and transparent. Each year, Congress appropriates funds specifically for the program (money is not taken out of the Department of Defense budget), decisions are made on the use of those funds, and all those funds are committed. This allows the program to move quickly in new directions as appropriate. Administrative costs are very low. All scientists who receive funding from the program are required to provide written reports on the results of their research projects and those reports are widely distributed and available on the program’s website.

Exciting Results
DOD-funded research has been an important part of the progress that has been made in breast cancer treatment over the last twenty years. For example, DoD BCRP research led to the development of the drug Herceptin, a targeted therapy that has been a true “breakthrough” for patients with HER2-positive breast cancer. Other important areas of breast cancer research that have received funding from the DoD BCRP include research to develop immunotherapy treatments for breast cancer, to improve understanding of inherited mutations that increase breast cancer risk, and to improve breast imaging through the use of new technologies. Virginia scientific researchers at institutions such as Virginia Commonwealth University, the University of Virginia, Hampton University and Virginia Tech have received over $34.5 million in funding since the program’s inception.

You can read much more about the DOD BCRP and its specific research projects at cdmrp.army.mil/bcrp.

Get Involved
To become a consumer reviewer for the DOD BCRP, you must be a survivor or someone experiencing breast cancer. You must also be an active participant in an advocacy, outreach, or support organization in your local community who nominates you. If you are interested, the best thing to do is to get involved with VBCF’s advocacy work.

VBCF trains and organizes volunteers to be advocates at both the state and federal level for improved public policy surrounding breast cancer. VBCF also offers funding through its Noss Scholarships for advocates to attend national and regional trainings on medical research and legislative advocacy. For more information about VBCF’s advocacy work and training, visit www.vbcf.org or contact kirsta@vbcf.org.
At RAM Wise this year, VBCF staff and volunteers hosted cancer and health education classes, with an audience of about 300 people over the course of two days. New this year, we partnered with a local resource person, Betsy Grossman, Outreach/Community Trials Navigator for UVA Wise Cancer Center, and continued our partnership with VCU School of Pharmacy students.

2018 Becky’s Place at RAM

Pictured (left to right): Erin Steigleder, Louisa Hammond, Diane Carter, Kathy Boehm, Governor Ralph Northam, Rachel Hunley. Thank you to Governor Northam for his support of our efforts at 2018 Becky’s Place!

VBCF is following several policy issues at the national level that have consequences for patients with breast cancer including: 1) the U.S. Department of Justice announcement that it will not defend several critical patient protections in the Affordable Care Act (ACA) including the protection for those with pre-existing conditions; and 2) the Metastatic Breast Cancer Access to Care Act (see above). To keep up with the latest, follow VBCF’s Facebook page and subscribe to our Advocacy Action Alerts.

VBCF is working with like-minded organizations across the country, through the National Breast Cancer Coalition, to enact federal legislation to waive the 24-month waiting period for Medicare eligibility and the 5-month waiting period for Social Security Disability Insurance benefits for individuals with metastatic breast cancer who qualify for social security disability. The median life expectancy for patients with metastatic breast cancer is just 26 months, so these waiting periods create an undue burden on the patient and their families trying to receive timely access to quality health care services.

H.R. 6114, the Metastatic Breast Cancer Access to Care Act, was introduced in June with 35 original cosponsors. However, as of September 1st, no Virginia Congressional Representatives have signed on to support this bill.

Take Action! Contact your member of Congress today to support this bill. Visit www.vbcf.org/advocate/national-advocacy for more information.

Wear Your Pink Ribbon . . . and Go Vote!

All of Virginia’s U.S. Representative seats and one Senate seat are on the ballot this election day - November 6, 2018. We urge you to get out and vote! In Virginia’s General Assembly elections last November, voters made sweeping changes to the make-up of the House of Delegates proving every vote matters.

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Sign up for Advocacy Action Alerts: www.vbcf.org/advocate/advocacy-alerts
Ways to Support the VA Breast Cancer Foundation

1. Make a tax-deductible donation. Use the enclosed envelope or donate online at www.vbcf.org/donate.

2. Join the drive against breast cancer! Buy a pink ribbon license plate for your vehicle from your local DMV. VBCF receives $15 for each plate purchased or renewed.

3. State employees can contribute to VBCF through the Commonwealth of Virginia campaign. Use CVC Code 03787.

4. Donate an unwanted vehicle. Donate unwanted cars, trucks, motorcycles, boats, RVs, or campers by calling 1-866-628-2277. Have your title handy when you call.

5. Host a fundraiser! VBCF makes it easy for businesses and organizations to show their support for breast cancer education and advocacy in Virginia. If you know of a business or organization that wants to keep their giving local and show their support for ending breast cancer, have them contact Kirsta Millar, Development Manager at kirsta@vbcf.org or at 804-285-1200 x. 203.

Virginia Medicaid Expansion: New Health Coverage for Adults

Starting January 1, 2019, more than 300,000 adults living in Virginia will have access to low-cost health coverage. Eligibility is based on income, with a single adult making up to $16,754 or a family of three up to $28,677, qualifying for coverage.

Assistance is available to help Virginians enroll, and the state’s Department of Medical Assistance Services will begin taking applications for new adult coverage after November 1, 2018.

Visit CoverVa.org for the latest information.

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