

Healthy LIFESTYLES



BREAST CANCER – Understanding the Many Reconstruction Options

Written by Kathleen Cosgrove

Karen Hinson, 50, knew that one day she'd be diagnosed with breast cancer. Both her grandmother and mother died from breast cancer. Karen, who works in the Women's Pavilion at Tallahassee Memorial Hospital, understood the illness and has been around healthcare most of her career.

Each year more than 200,000 women in the United States will be diagnosed with breast cancer. The diagnosis comes with an emotional and physical toll even though great strides have been made in understanding and treating the disease.

When Karen learned about her cancer, she was fairly certain that she would simply have her breasts removed and be rid of them. Her children encouraged her to look at alternatives, and she began gathering information and interviewing plastic surgeons. One call was to Ben J. Kirbo, M.D., a board-certified plastic surgeon and founder of Southeastern Plastic Surgery in Tallahassee.

"The more I talked with Dr. Kirbo; I realized that there were many reconstruction options," Karen said. "After interviewing him, there was no question, I knew immediately that I would definitely use Dr. Kirbo. His compassion and dedication eased my fears associated with my diagnosis and treatment."

"Women are so selfless. They've just received the most horrific diagnosis, and their heads are swirling with the decisions to make while worrying about their spouse, their children and often a fulltime job," said Dr. Kirbo.

"We strive to make decisions less overwhelming for our patients and help get them back in control and understand they do not need to be rushed into making a decision. In our practice, we set up appointments for breast cancer patients within 72 hours but more often, we try to see them the same day they call.

"The sooner we can see the patient, the sooner we can answer questions and lessen their turmoil," he said.

New techniques and devices available today make it possible to create a breast that closely resembles in form and appearance the natural breast. In some cases, women choose to conserve their breast by having a lumpectomy or segmental mastectomy.

While reconstruction is possible immediately following a mastectomy or breast removal, some patients prefer to wait. Other considerations include immediate reconstruction or delaying reconstruction, which may be selected by women undergoing radiation treatment.

Patient lifestyle and physical makeup contribute to the available options. Dr. Kirbo evaluates an individual's health, stage of breast cancer and the amount of tissue available, which varies with a patient's size, and helps patients evaluate their lifestyle to help guide them to make the decision.

"If a woman has enough tissue, one of the best options is to use her own tissue," said Dr. Kirbo.

Some women prefer implants, and the most common implant today is a saline-filled implant. Silicone gel-filled

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implants are used less often than they were in the past because of concerns about silicone leakage.

Karen, who experienced a double mastectomy, chose immediate reconstruction. Her abdominal tissue was used to create both breasts.

“I don’t know how I would have felt if I had looked into the mirror and seen my body without breasts or disfigured breasts,” she said.

“My advice to any woman would be to have reconstruction,” she added. “Looking back now, I cannot believe that I ever considered not having it. I know my daughters will be faced with this, and they would do the same thing.

“Emotionally to go through this is huge,” she said. “I felt Dr. Kirbo’s compassion from the moment I talked to him. The feeling extended and continued to permeate through his staff. The moment I entered the door, it was all about Karen. I was his only concern. It was all about me.”

She also emphasized the importance of letting all women know that they need to look at the options as well as remember to get routine check-ups and screenings and do at home self exams.

Melvina MacDonald, 55, would agree with that advice. Melvina is now four years post reconstruction. She discovered a lump in her breast four months after she had a mammogram.

“When I found the lump, I went immediately to my primary care doctor. I received the diagnostic mammogram, and the lump did not show up. After a biopsy, a lumpectomy was performed but when the pathology revealed no clean margins, a mastectomy was recommended,” MacDonald said.

After recovering from the shock of learning she had breast cancer and would need a mastectomy, she talked with her husband and primary source of support. She then began

considering reconstruction options and interviewing plastic surgeons. Melvina immediately connected with Dr. Kirbo.

“He helped me to understand the options and let me make the decision,” she said. “My husband and I had done a lot of research at a very emotional time, and I had considered going to New Orleans or Johns Hopkins.”

“I had done enough research that I could ask his opinion about certain procedures, and quickly I had a strong belief in him,” she added. “Dr. Kirbo really listened to me.”

MacDonald chose immediate reconstruction following the removal of her breast. “At the time of the reconstruction, I was 51. I was coping with my own mortality. I quickly came to the decision to have the reconstruction because I did not want to wake up and have to deal with my body image on top of having to cope with breast cancer” she said.

While some surgical procedures can be completed at Southeastern Plastic Surgery, which has its own licensed surgical suite, MacDonald was hospitalized for her treatment. Her reconstruction also included using her own tissue to reconstruct her breast.

“I would not have chosen to have had breast cancer,” she said. “Because I am a survivor, my reconstruction is a daily reminder to make my life the best it can be. This has been a gift,” she said.

Breast cancer options today have advanced considerably, but as Dr. Kirbo emphasizes, “You cannot minimize the importance of self exams and routine screenings. We reinforce and remind all

of our patients to conduct home self exams.”

Dr. Kirbo opened his offices in Tallahassee five years ago. Since its founding, Southeastern Plastic Surgery has been a leading cosmetic and reconstructive plastic surgery center offering a vast array of services and products. For more information, or to schedule a consultation, call 850-219-2000 or visit www.se-plasticsurgery.com.

To learn more about breast reconstruction options:

- ◆ www.se-plasticsurgery.com
- ◆ www.y-me.org
- ◆ www.pinkribbongirls.org
- ◆ www.cancer.gov
- ◆ www.komen.org
- ◆ www.natlbcc.org
- ◆ Dr. Susan Love’s Breast Book @ www.susanlovemd.org

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