

Breast cancer naivety ignores the toxic reality

By [Joanna Blythman](#)

I DON'T, as a general rule, give money to medical charities. Living in one of the world's richest countries (current economic woes notwithstanding), I'm wondering why I should be baking cupcakes for sick kids, or bungee jumping to help those suffering from the latest high-profile disease. Health should be a strategic government responsibility that's properly funded.

It unnerves me to think that as well-meaning volunteers, we are being encouraged to get involved with the detail of running such services, whether it's fundraising for a state-of-the-art piece of medical equipment or paying for new curtains to cheer up patients in the hospice. Isn't this what I pay my taxes for? After all, this isn't the Congo or Haiti.

I do give money to less popular, mainly foreign causes. As a British citizen, I am not morally or fiscally obliged to contribute towards rape counseling services in Darfur, blood packs for Gaza, mosquito nets in Mozambique or the prevention of soil erosion in Nepal, but I am happy to do so, providing that the charity in question is a campaigning one which draws attention to the roots of the problem as well as the suffering it causes.

I have - dare I say it? - a particular problem with many breast cancer charities. I'd pay more attention to the bras worn over tops if these organisations were focused on primary prevention, and by that I don't mean early detection and access to the best treatments available.

Maybe I missed it, but I don't hear them talking loudly enough about the environmental roots of the disease. Aren't we being slow learners here? In our daily lives we are constantly exposed, perfectly legally, to a cocktail of hundreds of toxic and hormone-disrupting chemicals which both common sense and science suggest are heavily implicated in ever-rising rates of the disease.

Awash with pink ribbons, we remain naive about the causes of breast cancer. We stump up without a murmur for lump-in-the-throat appeals to fund more research into the disease when the most obvious causes are staring us in the face. Our food contains residues of pesticides that are known carcinogens, but the government blithely assures us that these are at oxymoronic "safe" levels.

The skull and crossbones weedkillers in the garden hut, the fire retardants on the sofa, the bathroom cabinet and make-up bag with its bevvy of dodgy man-made chemicals, the petroleum by-products in traffic fumes, the office photocopier fumes, the solvents and

resins in the factory ... these are likely suspects to be going on with. By some accounts, such environmental hazards may collectively account for three-quarters of all cancers.

Of course there's no money to be made in prevention, if by that you mean cleaning up our environment and purging our lives of the most obvious man-made hazards. On the contrary, there are lots of enemies to be made. Companies flogging everything from shampoo to miracle toilet cleaner would soon pull their advertising if any media outlet was to flash too critical a spotlight on the carcinogens and gender-bending chemicals in their products.

And we've seen how the Westminster government has opposed, under pressure from the agri-chemical farming lobby, overdue European legislation to ban the use of the oldest and deadliest pesticides in the production of our food.

Meanwhile, we've spawned a whole cancer industry rubbing its hands at the prospect of making handsome profits from developing new drug and gene therapies.

Breast cancer looms so large these days it's hard to credit that it was pretty rare until the second half of the last century. More women survive now thanks to better screening and treatment but the incidence of the disease continues to rise.

With a few notable exceptions like the Scottish Breast Cancer Campaign and No More Breast Cancer (a coalition of trade union, feminist and environmental organisations), cancer charities reinforce government campaigns that target "lifestyle factors" such as exercise, diet, alcohol consumption and smoking. Following the Danish government's announcement last week that it will compensate women who have developed breast cancer after working nights, night working will doubtless be added to the list.

Women who keep on asking why, when they didn't smoke, ate their greens and drank only moderately, they still got breast cancer, are offered by way of further explanation a series of "that's just hard luck" factors; late menopause, early menstruation and genetic predisposition. This isn't telling the whole story. In fact, fewer than half of breast cancer cases can be attributed to these official risk factors.

This partial focus feeds the notion that breast cancer is an immutable feature of the female condition and therefore unpreventable, hence the slogan "early detection is the best prevention". But detection is not to be confused with making radical inroads into reducing the incidence of the disease.

Just as the public health pioneers of the 19th century made the connection between poor standards of sanitation, drainage, water supply and ventilation, and diseases such as typhus, cholera and consumption, we must make the connection between breast cancer and the environmental hazards built into the fabric of our daily lives.

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