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Komen's True Colors Revealed

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by Beverly Canin, Hope Nemiroff, Carol Robin of Breast Cancer Options

Susan G. Komen's recent decision to deny funding to Planned Parenthood inadvertently exposed the right wing foundation that lies solidly under Komen's pink ribbon cover. The betrayal of women and women's health is outrageous but not new. The Komen Foundation's funding to Planned Parenthood provides vital breast cancer screening and breast health education services to low-income, underserved populations, many in rural communities where Planned Parenthood may be their only source of health care. The Foundation denies political motivation, but defunding these programs would harm the very women Komen claims to be committed to.

Foes of the right to abortion have long criticized Komen for providing funding to Planned Parenthood, even though those funds do not support abortion services. The new anti-choice, anti-gay Komen vice president, Karen Handel drove the push to stop funding Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood is under investigation by an outspoken anti-abortion Republican congressman in a blatant effort to eventually cut off all federal funding.

Women's health should not become a political football, but for years the Komen Foundation, led by founder and chief executive, Nancy G. Brinker, who's almost half a million dollar salary has become a recent news item, has promoted policies that run counter to their purported interest in women's health. They have lobbied against a consumer friendly Patients' Bill of Rights initiated by Democrats, and then endorsed a weaker Republican version favoring HMOs. This happened at about the same time that Nancy G. Brinker was approved for an Ambassador post under George W. Bush. The Komen Foundation also lobbied against the Breast Cancer and Environment Research Act, the current Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the Breast and Cervical Cancer Prevention and Treatment Act, which provides Medicaid coverage for uninsured women (diagnosed through the Breast & Cervical Cancer Prevention & Screening Act), who had no other means to obtain treatment.

It's not just direct lobbying and positioning with "right-wing" influences that puts Susan G. Komen for the Cure in hypocritical contradiction with Nancy Brinker's endlessly stated commitment to her sister to do everything she can to end breast cancer. The organization's 2010 Partnership with Kentucky Fried Chicken for an October Pink Bucket Campaign brought an uproar from those who struggle to educate the public about modifiable dietary risk factors for breast cancer. The Komen commissioned "Promise Me" perfume had to be re-formulated to remove carcinogenic chemicals from the original formula, but the original formula product

remains on sale and the re-formulated product still contains questionable chemicals. In another “branding” power play, Susan G. Komen for the Cure is one of the leaders of “pinkwashing,” endorsing pink ribbons on products that are or may be environmentally harmful and receiving proceeds from “pinkwashing” corporations and pharmaceutical companies. Komen has also instituted or threatened lawsuits against groups, large and small, using the now trademarked “for the cure” in their fundraising events.

Komen overemphasizes the value of mammography and misleads the public into thinking many breast cancer risk reduction strategies are really prevention strategies. In fact, there is no known absolute means of breast cancer prevention or cure. Furthermore, despite commissioning a report on Breast Cancer and the Environment Research, Komen refuses to endorse a precautionary approach to toxic environmental exposures.

Although funding to Planned Parenthood was restored, Komen does not guarantee future funding. It’s time that Nancy Brinker admits that Susan G. Komen for the Cure has prioritized “branding” to the detriment of any feasible credibility as promoters of women’s health.

It should be noted that there is no Susan G. Komen affiliate between Albany and New York City, so organizations in the Hudson Valley region have never been eligible to receive Susan G. Komen grants, though there is extensive Susan G. Komen for the Cure fundraising in this region. None of the money raised here comes back to the community.

For the past 11 years, Breast Cancer Options has been committed to providing unbiased breast cancer support, education and advocacy in the Hudson Valley. Survivor-driven and volunteer-reliant, our determination has always been to serve as an independent source of information regarding breast cancer risk-reduction, detection, diagnosis, treatment options and survivorship for patients, survivors, their families and friends as well as the general public. While we collaborate with others for specific projects, we pride ourselves on recognizing and avoiding any conflicts of interest. ++

Breast Cancer Options is an independent, grassroots non-profit organization that serves six counties in the Hudson Valley on a \$100,000 annual budget. It says it does not take money from political organizations, drug companies or companies that use carcinogens in their products, “even though those sources would quickly make us financially solvent. We are committed to helping people get the unbiased information and support they need to make truly informed medical decisions, free from political agendas.” To reach the organization, see www.breastcanceroptions.org or call 845-339-HOPE.