BOOK REVIEW

Be a Survivor: Your Interactive Guide to Breast Cancer Treatment

For the many women and their partners who prefer getting their information from computers, here is a CD-ROM that gives the essential information about breast cancer and its treatment. Formatted for both Mac and PC Windows, it is user friendly. Being relatively experienced with my Pentium, I just popped it in the drive and started up. When the animated woman guide appeared asking me to click to the window if I wanted help or to click the doors if I wanted to begin immediately, I clicked the doors and never looked back. For those a little more intimidated, there are set-up directions on the enclosed packet and a short instruction guide that is easy to follow when you click on the window.

Clicking the doors brings up a desktop “medical office” from which you select a “chapter” by clicking on an object: a female statue for a breast cancer overview; doors to other rooms for treatment options; a painting of clasped hands for a guide for your partner; a wall chart for clinical trials and alternative therapies; a window for life after cancer; a bookstore for an extensive list of reference books; and a telephone for a list of resources. At the bottom of the screen is a medical bag that gives you useful tools, such as “quick tip,” “notepad,” (more below), a “finder,” and more. This CD-ROM has won several awards from film associations and I can see why: The icons and animations are vivid and attention getting.

I began at the beginning by clicking on the statue to get an overview. An animated white-coat-clad woman appeared at the desk in the medical office to talk about her topics. I was a bit disconcerted to hear complicated medical terms such as “axillary lymph node dissection” being discussed so soon with no explanation. It took me a while to realize that I could immediately click on the medical bag, click “finder,” and find the definition of the phrase. However, a first-time user having been just diagnosed might not even know how to spell the phrase, since it is only heard, not typed on the screen. This confusion continued throughout my use of this CD-ROM. You never know what you will be getting at any icon, sometimes a voice-over text with lots of explanations, sometimes a white-coated person talking to you with or without text, sometimes printed interviews, sometimes animated interviews, sometimes detailed explanations many pages long, sometimes merely a few paragraphs, sometimes startlingly real animated graphics, sometimes static photographs, and sometimes bare text.

However, once I got into the swing of it, I was clicking back and forth between chapters and subchapters, cross-checking and double-checking information. I began to see some of the same women and “medical personnel” in the same situations in different chapters, which helped me connect ideas.

Animated visualizations are what make this format better than a book. I particularly like the interviews where women talk about their experiences during and after treatment, male partners talk about their feelings, or women and their partners give advice. The cover says there are 100 interviews. The sections where a voice talks over the text would be most helpful to the newly diagnosed who often have a hard time absorbing so much new information; the appeal to two senses would strengthen the chance of that information being absorbed. The activated visualization of Breast Self-Exam is exceptionally good, showing a woman doing it all the way through, an excellent surrogate to personal direction, which is often not available.

The whole chapter on radiation is wonderful, having a virtual reality room showing the linear reactor unit in motion just as the radiation patient would experience it. A sub-section here shows an activated patient being measured for treatment, the woman’s body being marked, and diagrams of the rays simulated on that person. I can’t imagine an explanation in any other format being any better or in the long run more reassuring. When I was contemplating radiation, I made an appointment at the local hospital for a tour of the facility. They did it as a big favor to me. Most women, not having that opportunity, would appreciate this CD-ROM.

The chapter on surgery gives all the details, with a computerized animation showing the extensive removal of tissue. This would have helped me, as I came out of the mastectomy wondering why I had lost so much skin; no one had thought to explain it ahead of time. At the end of the surgery chapter, two animated women show their mastectomy scars from all angles, while they talk to you about the experience. I was lucky that I had a friend who offered to show me her scar. Otherwise, I’d have had no idea what I was headed for.

The chapter on reconstruction shows a woman in recovery doing recommended exercises. I would have greatly appreciated having such a demonstration after my surgery in 1987 before there was much interest in such recuperative tasks.

The “interactive” part of the CD is the notebook, a valuable tool. From the medical bag, a click brings up a virtual spiral-rulled notebook on which you can type anything you want—notes to yourself, questions to ask the doctor—whatever. As a separate window, it stays on top of your current chapter and disappears when you click it off, returning you to your place in the text, which is still there underneath. I didn’t see any way to save this material, but you can print it out. You’d want to do that anyway, to have all your important notes for medical appointments. You can also move to the notebook questions posed in the text—only questions though, not sentences or paragraphs. To get textual information into your notes, you have to write your own summary, a good idea come to think of it, because you then fix it in your brain. The notebook scrolls to enable you to store a lot of material.

Women and their partners will get a lot out of this CD-ROM. All the women in my breast cancer group had partners who helped them do the research, a lot of them on their computers. All basic information is available here, given in scientific and lay terms, 12 hours of fact-packed information as the cover says. You won’t find here what to do if the cancer...
metastasizes—there is nothing on bone marrow transplants, for instance—but you will get everything about the biopsy, telling loved ones, planning treatment, dealing with the psychologic aspects of the disease, recovering, dealing with sexuality, and getting on with your life afterward. The virtual library offers a long list of publications, including other Lange medical productions. The virtual telephone lists numerous resources from self-help organizations to places to buy clothing, head coverings, and prostheses. So, all bases are covered.

Libraries, clinics, and women’s centers would do well to add this to their collection of resource materials. It is a truism that we learn best when we get information from several senses. This CD-ROM offers sight of text and movement, sound, and touch. A lot of learning goes on through this interactive software.

MERLE O’ROURKE THOMPSON

Note

Correspondence to: Merle O’Rourke Thompson, Ph.D., 6012 Morgan Ct., Alexandria, VA 22312.

Books Received


