

# WARRIOR ON! LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE 'BIG C'



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**J**anuary 15, 2016. I was away from home on business. It was late Friday afternoon, and the call I expected to receive that day hadn't come. Desperate to know the results of Monday's biopsy, I called my physician's office and asked to speak to the nurse. She said the words no woman wants to hear: "I am so sorry to tell you this, but you have breast cancer." This short phone call was the beginning of a very scary year, and looking back, an unexpectedly hopeful journey filled with blessings and joy. I met amazing people, learned amazing lessons, and unintentionally inspired other women. I became a Warrior!

I have been in dentistry for 25 years and worked in several capacities in and out of dental practices: dental assistant, dental hygienist, office manager, dental software trainer and management consultant. My career has been blessed, but I had no idea how blessed until 2016. I hope to help other women in our wonderful industry by sharing some of the lessons I learned while undergoing five months of chemotherapy, two surgeries (one major and one minor) and lots of recovery time in a recliner.

Every journey is unique. When a woman shares a diagnosis like breast cancer, people often come out of the woodwork to share opinions and offer advice about treatment, diet or whatever fad they read about on Facebook. This is not helpful. As a Warrior, I had to do anything and everything I could to ease discomfort, not only physically, but also emotionally and mentally. I learned to allow myself grace to be able to do what I needed to do to recover, without fear of judgment. Some Warriors lose weight, some gain. Some Warriors feel angry when someone tries to present a silver lining to them (You'll lose weight!" or "You'll get new girls!"), but I found my "internal giggle" as Lois Banta says, when I embraced these encouragements! Some Warriors are able to work through their treatment, but I found the chemo-fog phenomenon to be overwhelming and debilitating. Every Warrior has difficult decisions



to make about their treatment, and none of them are fun. None are taken lightly, and every decision will be right for that person at the time it is made. I learned that the decisions that seemed obvious to me were the wrong decisions for others.

Humanity is beautiful. People want to help. Let them. Some Warriors share their story privately, perhaps with only close friends or family. However, I've always found the support of others to be uplifting and strengthening, so I wasn't shy about sharing my journey though a blog of sorts. I joined a support group for women dealing with breast cancer in Austin. My challenge came when I had to ask for help. I needed help caring for myself after chemo and after surgery. I needed help caring for my home when

I couldn't and most difficult, I needed help financially. But because I asked, my cup overflowed in all regards, and I was blessed. The dental community, my family and my wonderful friends helped me at home and online. And I continue to be blessed every day.

A good friend in dentistry recently told me a story. She said another friend of hers shared that she had just finished chemotherapy to treat cancer, but she hadn't told anyone else in their circle about it because she did not want to be a burden for anyone. My friend was so sad and hurt that she couldn't help, or even pray for, this woman. She felt the opportunity to offer support was taken away from her. Even though I heard this story after I was out of treatment for some time, I learned the importance of letting people help. As women, I feel we're conditioned that asking for help is a sign of weakness, and it goes against the grain for so many of us. On the flip side of this, as women we also feel the desire and drive to support, help and nurture our loved ones. I learned that asking for help fulfills this need in others and has benefits for our own healing and peace.

Preparation is important. While I'm not sure you can ever really prepare for something like this, we all try to have things lined up for the "what if" scenario. As I was working hard on recovering, I thought about the dental practices that I worked with as a consultant. It's disappointing how much reluctance for delegation, training and especially cross-training that I ran into from owners and employees. As dental students, little to no business curriculum is offered, and unless a practice owner is proactive with hiring a consultant or coach, they are often flying by the seats of their pants when they purchase or open a practice. That's a big gamble.

I heard, "No one else can do it right, so I just take care of it," or some variation of that statement countless times. Well, what happens when an integral person in the practice becomes ill or incapacitated? Typically, chaos ensues until someone can be brought up to speed, often to the detriment of their other responsibilities. Without clear job descriptions, SOP manuals and written protocols, it's very difficult for a person to step into an unexpected vacancy. Sadly, sometimes there can be a passive-aggressive intention behind this: "They won't appreciate me until I'm not here, and they don't know how to do anything! Then they'll miss me!" When I hear this sentiment, I must ask the person, "What do you want your legacy to be? Do you want them to resent you because things are chaotic now that you are gone? Or do you want them to think of you with love and admiration because the business ran smoothly even after you weren't there?" I gently remind them that creating systems, delegation and development of others (e.g., cross-training) is true leadership.

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Be your own advocate. I had to fight for my choices in treatment. Specifically, with my choice of bilateral mastectomies and reconstruction. I was told by doctors, both male and female, that the sensible choice was to move forward with a lumpectomy. This is the choice that science supported, they said. And while that choice is the right choice for some women, it was not the right choice for me. Ultimately, my decision came down to the fact that I had to be the one to sleep at night, and I would be the one to go through treatment again if the cancer recurred. And I would be the one to live in fear before the routine mammograms (no more of those – another silver lining!). I advocated for myself, and now, 18 months after the surgery, I still am grateful that I stuck to my guns.

The future is so bright! I have generally always been a positive person, but when faced with this illness, my heart became filled with gratefulness, and this stirred even more positive energy in my core! I knew from the beginning that I was going to beat my cancer, and if I didn't live my life to its fullest when I recovered, I was wasting an opportunity that I was granted. I am now channeling that positivity and grace into myself and my career! As a new business owner, and as a woman working in a man's world of business, I strive to bring the best me I can be to all my clients. I choose to be happy and to create satisfaction. Of course, I am continuing to learn my Warrior lessons, and every day brings new challenges, joy and love!

### **Warrior on!**

About the author: Over her 25 years of experience in the dental industry, Andrea has led practices from many positions: dental assistant, hygienist, office manager, Dentrix trainer, practice management consultant and speaker. She approaches her work with each practice uniquely to develop protocols and workflows to reduce stress and advance patient communication. In this current healthcare climate, it can be a challenge to navigate the murky waters of dental insurance and still achieve fulfillment and life balance. Andrea is passionate about helping dentists and their teams believe in what they are providing to the patient family and realize contentment and purpose. Her gift of connection and empathy is a key element in engaging with audience members, as well as developing leadership one on one with her clients. See what Andrea can do for your practice and your team!