

By Fran Drescher
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RAISING GLOBAL AWARENESS OF WOMEN'S HEALTH ISSUES

A doctor tells his patient, "I have good news and bad news. The good news is you have 48 hours to live." The woman says, "If that's the good news, then what's the bad news?" The doctor answers, "I was supposed to tell you yesterday."




Through education, prevention, and policy change, we will revolutionize the way Americans think about cancer.


Too many women are being told that they have cancer today, when they should have been told yesterday.

It took me two years and eight doctors to get a proper diagnosis of uterine cancer. As a result of my experience, I wrote The New York Times bestseller, *Cancer Schmancer*. I realized that what happened to me had happened to millions of women. It was then that I realized the book was not the end, but rather the beginning of a journey to improve women's health care and raise consciousness of wellness and prevention issues globally. Toward this end, I founded the Cancer Schmancer Movement and Foundation, and made advocacy for Stage 1 diagnosis of cancer my life's mission.

Cancer Schmancer is a policy-driven women's health movement that will alert Capitol Hill that the collective female voice is louder and more powerful than that of the richest corporate lobbyist. Through education, prevention, and policy change, we will revolutionize the way Americans think about cancer. The mission of Cancer Schmancer is to ensure that all women with cancer get diagnosed in Stage 1, when cancer is most curable. We want women to understand the early warning whispers of the cancers that could affect them, and the available tests that could save their lives. We encourage them to become better partners with their physicians, and to transform from patients into medical consumers. We all know that early detection equals survival. But what's being done by



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patients, the government, and the medical community to ensure early detection? We need to take the right steps forward to ensure that all cancers get diagnosed in Stage 1.

Doctors are bludgeoned by big business health insurance companies to go the least expensive route of diagnostic testing. They are trained to think, “If you hear hooves galloping, don’t look for zebra because it’s probably a horse.” But if you happen to be a zebra, you’re in big trouble! That is why we must be in the driver’s seat when it comes to our health care. Doctors are well-intentioned, but they are not gods. Because when the doctor calls to tell you you have cancer, he goes home to eat dinner with his family, while you go home to eat your heart out with yours. So whose life is it anyway?

Women worldwide must take control of their bodies and leave behind the Victorian

notion that “If you can grin and bear it, do so, because your family comes first.” And I’m here to say that if you put your family’s health first, you’re really putting them last because you are useless to them when you are six feet under!

We want all women to remember that the early warning signs of cancer are often ignored or misdiagnosed for far more benign illnesses. For instance, women with ovarian cancer are often misdiagnosed as having Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). When I meet a woman who tells me she has IBS, I say, “Honey, I hope that’s what you have. But, for a moment, step away from the gastroenterologist, go to your gynecologist, and get a TVU (transvaginal ultrasound) and a CA-125 blood test to ensure it’s not ovarian cancer.” 80 percent of all women with ovarian cancer find out in the late stages, and 70 percent of them will die. This must change.

To educate women about the early warning signs, risk factors, and tests that are available for the early detection of women’s cancers, we developed the *Cancer Schmancer Tea Party* DVD, which shares my story, and the poignant and empowering survival stories of real women. It also includes our suggestions on how to be a better health care consumer and urges transformation from the passive role of patient to the active role of medical consumer. We must arm ourselves with information and listen to our bodies. No one knows your body like you do!

In just over a year, Cancer Schmancer has made many important strides. September 2007, in observance of Gynecologic Cancer Awareness Month, I spoke on the importance of Stage 1 diagnosis of cancer at the Gynecologic Cancer and Disorders Briefing on Capitol

Hill, hosted by Representative Steve Israel, who leads the Congressional Cancer Caucus. Also, in honor of Congressional Black Caucus Week, I spoke about the broken health care system in the US, and about early diagnosis and cancer prevention in a panel moderated by Representative John Conyers.

We worked with peer organizations to lobby for Johanna's Law, also known as the Gynecologic Cancer Education and Awareness Act, to create a national gynecologic cancer education campaign. It passed in the Senate by unanimous consent, passed in the House, and the President signed it into law. We then worked to secure \$6.5 million in initial funding, which will go to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). We are working with the team at the CDC to ensure that we get the most bang for our buck!

In January 2008, we teamed up with the Speaker pro Tempore of the California State Assembly, Sally Lieber, to introduce a women's cancer health care initiative in California. The bill mandates that certain cancer screening and diagnostic tools (i.e. the transvaginal ultrasound) must be offered at every woman's basic gynecologic exam. In April, Cancer Schmancer, along with the Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the University of Pittsburgh, spearheaded the Gynecologic Cancer Awareness Gala at the Women's Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery, honoring Representative John Murtha and his commitment to women's gynecologic cancer research.

Cancer Schmancer is also working with other organizations to get carcinogens and suspected carcinogens removed from women's beauty and skin care products. We have to be sure



Photo by Carolyn Glassman, US Embassy

Drescher urges Hungary's Surgeon General Ferenc Falus to focus greater attention on the government's role in cancer prevention among the Hungarian public.



Drescher meets with leaders of the Women's Caucus of the Kosovo Parliament.


that what we are putting on our bodies to look beautiful on the outside is not harming us on the inside. American women have the highest levels of flame retardant in their breast milk of all women in the industrialized world! What we don't know truly is killing us.

I'm very proud of my recent appointment by the United States Department of State to the position of Public Diplomacy Envoy for Women's Health Issues. I will be leveraging my international celebrity to speak to women globally about the state of their health. For my first trip in October 2008, I'll be visiting Romania, Hungary, Kosovo, and Poland. My mother's family has roots in Romania, and my father's family comes from Poland. They came to this country looking for a better life, so I'm especially honored to be returning two generations later as a representative of this great land of opportunity.

Rich or poor, young or old, no matter what nationality, poor health is the great equalizer. And wherever I go, whomever I speak to, invariably people are surprised to learn of the vast chasm of survival rates that separates Stage 1 diagnosis from Stage 4 diagnosis. For instance, a woman diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer has a 21 percent chance of reaching the coveted five year survival mark while a woman diagnosed in Stage 1 has a nearly 100 percent chance of survival.

Both health care infrastructure and the culture of health care vary widely. In some places, not only is the health care system rudimentary, but also people do not speak openly about certain parts of the body. When women are empowered with knowledge, we're unstoppable. If we knew the early warning signs and would go to the doctor when we felt them, a lot more of us would live longer, healthier lives.

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The Cancer Schmancer's motto is: "We don't care who you vote for, as long as who you vote for is voting for you!" 47 million uninsured, and millions more under-insured, constitutes a health care crisis. We are a non-partisan organization, and we have worked with lawmakers from both parties who are committed to addressing this crisis. Our goal, ultimately, is to raise consciousness that late-stage diagnosis is epidemic, educate Americans about cancer prevention and how to become proactive about their own health, and get policy makers to help us win this fight. In January we will have a new President and a new Congress, and—we hope—a lot of new energy in Washington to put this problem on the front burner and make late-stage diagnosis of cancer a thing of the past! 

Fran Drescher

Fran Drescher, an accomplished actress, writer, and health care advocate, is the newest person to be nominated as an American Public Diplomacy Envoy. Drescher began her acting career in 1977 with "Saturday Night Fever" and has co-starred in countless other films with some of Hollywood's biggest names. However, she is best known for her television sitcom "The Nanny", which continues to attract a worldwide audience in syndication. In her role as Fran Fine in "The Nanny," she received two Emmy and two Golden Globe nominations.

In addition to her work as an actress, Drescher has made a name for herself as a writer of two New York Times best selling books: *Enter Whining*, the story of her life from her Queen's youth to becoming a television star; and *Cancer Schmancer*, which recounts her experience battling uterine cancer. In recognition of the latter book, Drescher received the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship Writer's Award.

After completing the book "Cancer Schmancer," Drescher launched the Cancer Schmancer Movement, a non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring that all women's cancers be diagnosed while in Stage 1, when it is most curable. She also successfully lobbied for the passage of Johanna's Law, which promotes gynecological cancer education and awareness among women and health care providers. Drescher has received many honors for her work advocating for cancer awareness including: the John Wayne Institute's Woman of Achievement Award, the Gilda Award, the City of Hope Woman of the Year Award, the Hebrew University Humanitarian Award, and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine's Spirit of Achievement Award.