



# Drilling Down Deep: Pink Ribbons, Fracking, and Silencing Women's Voices

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*A check-up from the Stage 4 breast cancer community*

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Maybe we've finally found the limit to "everything's pretty in pink!" I'm a young woman who lost my mother and best friend to stage 4 breast cancer last year. Dozens of my mentors and colleagues face cancer daily, and many have died from the disease or its treatments. I inherit from them the will to create a fracking-free, pro-health economy. The people I know and work with who face stage 4 cancers are passionate leaders for political and social norms that stop rather than cause cancer.

This year, as we passed National Metastatic Breast Cancer Day (October 13), all I could think about were the hilarious jokes my mom Barbara used to make about "Pink"



breast cancer campaigns that so often miss the mark of what's important to women facing life-threatening cancer. She taught me that when you see something as ludicrous as pink gas drill bits "for the cure", you have to laugh so you don't cry. She might have had a few choice words for the Komen-Baker Hughes partnership that claims to represent the concerns of families "touched" by breast cancer — "Those Mother-Frackers!" She might have written to her friends and colleagues: "This October, let's not let good intentions send us to 'hell in a handbasket' ... (or to heaven in a 'Frack casket'), ok?"

## Making the Links between Breast Cancer Advocacy and Fracking



Marie and her mother, Barbara Garlock.

Breast cancer is not just a personal health crisis — it's a public health crisis that directly intersects with other political issues. In North Carolina, amidst threats to our state's health and future, a powerful people's coalition has instituted something called "Moral Mondays." In the last two years we've had mass weekly public rallies, a Moral March of nearly 80,000 people, and more than 1,100 arrests in government buildings, which often centered on two things important to breast cancer advocates and Breast Cancer Action: the danger fracking poses to our health, and the need for life-saving healthcare coverage. Our Governor, who publicly "recognizes" breast cancer, recently fast-tracked fracking, and simultaneously refused free federal Medicaid expansion for 500,000 residents — part of a nationwide pattern where people positioned for toxic poisoning are denied health access, in mass. These are related injustices breast cancer advocates cannot ignore.

At a recent Center for Environmental Health symposium I attended — a welcome event during October's pink distractions — national experts including medical professionals, environmental hazard researchers, community health monitors and grassroots watchdog leaders convened to share cutting-edge information and action plans to address the alarming human health impacts of fracking. Across the U.S., in states like PA, TX, WY and CO, the quantitative, qualitative, participant-action and mapping research shows us that fracking endangers public health in a number of ways; fracking chemicals are linked to hormone disruption, neurological and respiratory dangers, to cancers, and more specifically, to breast cancer.

## 1. Fracking toxifies our water bodies and human bodies.

To fight breast and other cancers, we need environments free of hormone-disrupting chemicals. Frackers do not honor so-called "cancer warriors" by creating *more* toxic exposures that put people at risk for cancer. And it's even more insulting to actually expose people to cancer under the facade of "ending it forever". As people who face cancer know well, it's confusing and difficult to deal with toxicity in our bodies — indeed, exposure to toxic chemicals as a part of chemotherapy treatment regimens is the conundrum of modern cancer care. Chemo "hurts to help", and even the tiniest amounts of toxic chemicals can add up to have a huge impact on long-term health and everyday life functioning (a problem amplified for people with stage 4).



Everywhere fracking happens, toxic, hormone-disrupting chemicals are used. Thanks to legal loopholes fracking companies negotiate with local governments — "incentives" for "bringing jobs" — carcinogenic fracking chemicals are used outside reasonable regulatory oversight, and kept in wells that pollute surface water and underground aquifers. As one NC cancer caregiver puts it: "All you need to know is [that] the companies won't tell you what's in the chemicals. I'm sorry, that's not intellectual property — that's information that affects our health." According to the Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project, many residents report even their dogs won't drink water from residential wells contaminated by fracking fluids.

According to Dr. Susan Nagel, University of Missouri Obstetrics, Gynecology and Women's Health Professor and Endocrine Society researcher, "We already know the dangers of the few chemicals about which the fracking industry releases information." For example, both BPA and benzene, which are directly linked to breast cancer, impact human health at extremely low concentrations — at one part per billion, or one drop in an Olympic-sized swimming pool. A CEH Symposium panelist, Nagel said of hormone-disrupting chemicals: "It's

like putting the wrong key in the lock — it gets stuck. We know breast cancer always occurs in relation to the entire lifespan, heightened by larger hormone disruptions earlier on. ...We've measured greater endocrine-disrupting activity in surface water near fracking sites, and there are already [demonstrated] links to birth outcomes."

## 2. Public health injustices are deepened by fracking in acute and systemic ways.

Women who face metastatic breast cancer are grossly underrepresented in public spheres and research — and people with such aggressive cancers are also more likely to be racial minorities and part of low-income families. Low-income residents and people of color are usually impacted first and worst by pollution sites like those created by fracking; they're also more likely to fall in the well-identified U.S. "coverage gap" for quality healthcare. Reducing involuntary toxic exposure and ensuring quality healthcare for all — care that's dialogue-centered and based in relevant science — are two ways patient advocacy and health justice groups like Breast Cancer Action have rightly identified to systematically reduce breast cancer's spread and the numbers of women diagnosed.



Due to NDA's (non-disclosure agreements) and "gag rules" put in place by fracking companies in many states, people's health complaints are silenced, treated in isolation, or suppressed from public knowledge. At the same time, physicians and nurses across the country are alarmed by wider public health effects of fracking on their communities.

As Dr. Pouné Saberi, a University of Pennsylvania Clinical Practice Professor and Physicians for Social Responsibility leader explains: "The fundamental challenge in health policy around fracking is the inability to protect the vulnerable." At the CEH Symposium, Dr. Saberi described treating uninsured patients with toxic exposures from fracking (including possible lead poisoning), and noted many health professionals' frustrating realities in fracked communities. Fracking companies impose gag rules on exposed residents, and implement confidentiality agreements which block local medical professionals' ability to share their findings with other physicians — a process severely limiting both exposure data and the quality of healthcare delivery. In Pennsylvania, the Department of Health has been cited for throwing out residents' fracking-related health complaints, presumably due to industry pressures to destroy records.

## 3. We need clean air to breathe, and a voice to speak. Fracking threatens them both.

As many fracking evaporation waste pits are currently designed, cloudy days mean toxic chemicals spread out into the air supply of surrounding towns and cities. Acute and long-term respiratory and neurological disorders, nosebleeds, headaches, and fainting are common among residents in fracking regions. Nationwide research reveals fracked towns contend with constant 18-wheeler traffic and diesel exposure (a known carcinogen), noise pollution, and alarming increases in crime, sexual assault, and human trafficking resulting from out-of-town workers' "man camps."

Dr. Lenore Resick, a Duquesne University Clinical Professor of Nursing, interviews mid-Appalachian women in Pennsylvania impacted by fracking; she says they report feelings of constant stress and powerlessness. “They say, ‘You just feel power pressing down on you.’ Because if their husband’s working in the gas fields, their neighbors signed gag orders, and their air or water is toxic, who will want to hear what they have to say? They’re telling me, ‘You’ve gotta listen to us, you’ve gotta get our story out there.’ We must understand the meaning of health in the context of environment,” said Resick.

For most people I know who’ve faced breast cancer, especially the life-threatening kind, breath and voice are of utmost importance. For people who are sick —including my colleagues and family who developed shortness of breath due to cancer or treatment side effects — oxygen is all the more precious a resource when scarce. It cycles to support the voices of people with stage 4 cancers who want to put a stop to cancer “where it starts”; rather than simply detecting it they want to reduce what feeds cancer before and after diagnosis. To “frack for an end to breast cancer” is quite a low blow to the people we love who’ve faced it.

### A change in awareness

What if breast cancer “awareness” campaigning meant linking health and environmental justice in our minds? That message may not be so easily painted on the tip of a pink fracking drill bit.

If my mom were here, I imagine she’d write to her hundreds of blog followers about how these poisonous pink drill bits call on both her eye-trembling irritation and her belief that a higher good is possible. Because, after all — she’d say in all her playfulness of spirit and contagious sense of ethical commitment — wrongdoers both solicit our prayers and call us to rally, at the polls and in the streets. She was always clear in her hope to “be of service to others” rather than be represented as an “individual warrior” facing cancer. She might post a picture of her sign from “Frack-Free NC” rallies we attended last year, reading “Please Don’t Kill My Family: Cancer SUCKS!”, the word “family” surrounded by hand-drawn hearts. Barbara would probably invoke the names of her many friends who’ve passed away from breast cancer, whom it mightily dishonors to push fracking through a pink ribbon “PR” pipeline.



But because my mom passed away from breast cancer last year, it’s me who’s offering the invitation: Don’t “Fracking” Pink for her, for me, or for anyone you know who faces cancer or loves someone who does, or did. Instead:

- Support officials and organizations who protect your and your children’s rights to toxicity-free, cancer-free lives now and in the future.
- Get rid of leaders — whomever they may be —willing to sell your health to companies that explode our ground for easy cash, and who force gas-dependence.
- Call for research into environmental links between toxins and cancers, especially breast cancer (top charities often give very little to environmental research, even though the U.S. President’s Cancer Panel

Report says at least half of cancers are environmentally linked).

- Call for lasting action that protects our rights to quality healthcare for all, to non-toxic air, and to drinking water that leaves our hormonal systems intact.

Perhaps that's what we need for "Breast Cancer Awareness" month, and all year long — a renewed practice in ethics and less "mother-frackin" tricks. The loving, clear call from so many who've faced cancer to "Use Your Powers for Good, not Greed." A move beyond awareness to education, organizing, and action that honors our loved ones who have faced breast and other cancers by making sure countless others won't have to do the same.

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