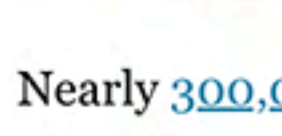




Susan Love, center left, at a breast cancer symposium in San Antonio on Dec. 12, 2008. (Lisa Krantz / San Antonio Express-News/Associated Press)

BY CORINNE PURTILL | STAFF WRITER

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Nearly [300,000 women in the U.S.](#) will receive a diagnosis of invasive breast cancer this year. For many, their first instinct upon hearing the news will be to arm themselves with information, Googling, reading and quizzing their doctors in an effort to understand their illness and the best route to recovery.

The fact that there are both a range of treatment options and a wealth of information available to patients with breast cancer is due in part to Dr. Susan Love, the surgeon, researcher, author and activist who died Sunday at home in Los Angeles at the age of 75.

The cause was a recurrence of leukemia, with which she was [first diagnosed in 2012](#).

“If anything, having cancer myself has given me a new sense of urgency,” Love told the Times after her first round with the disease.

“It’s a reminder that we have a finite term. Being raised a good Catholic girl, now an Episcopalian, I was raised to make the world a better place. I’ve got to do that.”

As the founding director of what is now the UCLA/Revlon Breast Clinic, and later as a bestselling author and frequent public advocate, Love lobbied for more federal funding for women’s health research and a clinical approach that gave patients a voice in their own treatment.

She encouraged patients to take an active role in their care and created a comprehensive guide to breast cancer long before the internet would make such information readily accessible.

“She ought to be seen as a trailblazer, a pioneer that moved the field forward in several significant ways: the treatment of breast cancer, the bringing of women to an equal playing field in terms of funding,” said Dr. Catherine Carpenter, a UCLA cancer epidemiologist. “I don’t know where we’d be without her.”

Love was born in Long Branch, N.J. in 1948. She chose medicine as her vocation as a high school student in Mexico City, where her family had moved for her father’s work.

“I had this wonderful nun as a biology teacher,” Love told The Times [in 1992](#). “She got me interested in science.”

She was also drawn to the church and initially intended to practice both as a doctor and a nun. She entered a convent as an undergraduate at Notre Dame of Maryland University but eventually left both institutions, completing her bachelor’s degree at Fordham University.

She earned her medical degree at the State University of New York Downstate’s College of Medicine and did her residency at Boston’s Beth Israel Hospital, where she would become its first female general surgeon in 1980.

In the early days of Love’s practice in the male-dominated field of surgery, breast operations were seen as less challenging and less prestigious work by many status-conscious practitioners.

“I once had a chief of surgery tell me, ‘The trouble with breast surgery is that the talk-to-cut ratio is all wrong,’” [she told The Times](#). “You have to talk too much to the patient for the amount of cutting you get to do.”

Wary of being sidelined, Love initially resisted being pigeonholed as a breast specialist. Yet the more patients she saw, the more dissatisfied she became with surgery’s disinterested approach to a common and often-deadly cancer.

The prevailing treatment for breast cancer at the time was a mastectomy, radiation and chemotherapy, a grueling, one-size-fits-all approach that Love often derided as “slash, burn and poison.”

Though in some cases they were lifesaving necessities, mastectomies weren’t the right fit for every patient. They also tended to favor the surgeon’s schedule more than the patient’s needs — removing a breast entirely took less time and required less technical skill than the lumpectomy procedures emerging in the 1980s.

Love, who joined the Harvard Medical School faculty in 1987, believed that patients could and should press their doctors on the ideal course of treatment.

“That was quite revolutionary at the time,” said Dr. Patricia Ganz, a UCLA breast cancer oncologist and director of the Center for Cancer Prevention and Control Research at the Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center. “Women began to realize that they didn’t have to do exactly what the first doctor told them.”

Love often wore a badge on the lapel of her lab coat reading: “Keep abreast. Get a second opinion.” In 1990, she published “Dr. Susan Love’s Breast Book,” a sweeping guide to the biology and treatment of breast cancer.

Co-written with Karen Lindsey, the book was hailed as a bible for the newly diagnosed, going on to sell some 500,000 copies across its seven editions.

“Her book was essential before we had the internet and other organizations on the web that can provide accurate information,” Ganz said.

In 1991, Love co-founded the National Breast Cancer Coalition, an advocacy group that lobbies for breast cancer funding and access to care. The following year she and her family moved to Los Angeles, where she joined the faculty at UCLA and became the founding director of its breast clinic. Four years later, she left patient care and resigned from the center to pursue an MBA and establish a broader platform for her advocacy. She became the medical director of the Santa Barbara Breast Cancer Institute, expanding it into a nationwide foundation to increase breast cancer research. In 2000, the organization was renamed the Susan Love MD Breast Cancer Research Foundation.

Love blazed trails in her personal life as well. After giving birth in 1988, Love successfully sued the state of Massachusetts with her partner, Helen Cooksey, for the right to jointly adopt their daughter, paving the way for other gay parents to ensure their rights in a state that did not yet recognize same-sex marriage.

Love and Cooksey, also a surgeon, married in California as soon as gay marriage became legal — first in San Francisco in 2004 and a second time when licenses were issued statewide in 2008.

“She was not afraid to be first, not afraid to say: I demand to be respected, I expect that I will be respected,” said Dr. Laura Esserman, a breast cancer oncologist at UC San Francisco. “And she did that also for women, whose complaints had been ignored.”

In addition to her wife, Love is survived by their daughter, Katie Patton-LoveCooksey, and daughter-in-law, Diana Patton-LoveCooksey.

Friends and colleagues reached on Wednesday remembered Love as an iconoclast with a seemingly endless reserve of energy — an “unabashed, out-of-the-box thinker,” Esserman said, who was unafraid to challenge what she believed no longer served the patients she cared for so deeply.

“This is the kind of legacy she leaves,” Esserman said. “Question the status quo. Look hard at the evidence — is it right? Is it good enough? And when it’s not, work your ass off to change it.”

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