

Angelina Jolie's drastic step adds to the paranoia

From Prof M. Vidyasagar.

Sir, Christopher Caldwell's column about Angelina Jolie's decision to undergo a double mastectomy ("Angelina Jolie and the dilemmas of genetic screening", Comment, May 18) is one of the few pieces of coherent writing I have seen on the subject in an ocean of drivel.

All commentators seem obliged to declare that she has "sent out a powerful message", even if they can't quite figure out what the message is. I can confirm Mr Caldwell's comment that "campaigners have raised 'awareness' of the disease [breast cancer] to the point at which the average woman overestimates her chance of contracting it".

Whenever I give a general lecture, I begin by asking the audience which form of cancer is most deadly for women. Invariably everyone, especially the women, answer "breast cancer" and are startled to learn that

breast cancer is actually third, behind cancers of the respiratory system (lung cancer) and of the digestive system (mainly colon and pancreas). A similar statement can be made about men and prostate cancer, but that would be a topic for another letter.

A recent paper in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* points out that a woman with a BRCA1 mutation has a 57 per cent chance of contracting breast cancer before the age of 70, whereas for a BRCA2 mutation the figure is 49 per cent. Mr Caldwell mentions that Ms Jolie's doctor estimated her risk at 87 per cent (by what age?). It would be highly desirable for the doctor to explain the reasoning used to arrive at this figure. My own advice to a young woman with a BRCA1 mutation would be based on turning around the above statistic and to say: "You have a 43 per cent chance of not

contracting breast cancer until the age of 70. Be vigilant, but don't take any drastic and irreversible steps now based on what you think may happen later, about which no one can be sure."

"Take control of your own medical destiny" would sit well on a bumper sticker, but given how easily the public can be manipulated through a combination of creating paranoia and hard selling, in practice this would lead to more and more unnecessary diagnostic tests and surgeries, as befits the commercial business that is passed off as the American healthcare system.

Until now most unnecessary surgeries have been internal; it would be sad if these procedures now start leading to external disfigurement as well.

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