

BREAST CANCER: Komen critics need stronger argument

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For the past couple of years, pro-life groups have questioned donations made to Planned Parenthood by the Susan G. Komen Foundation, a national nonprofit that describes itself as “a global leader in the fight against breast cancer through its support of innovative research and community-based outreach programs.”

For example, in a news release under the headline, “Susan G. Komen Foundation: Putting ideology ahead of women’s lives,” a Palos Heights, Ill.-based group called the Coalition on Abortion/Breast Cancer, pointed out that the foundation had “granted funds over the last few years to Planned Parenthood, the nation’s largest abortion provider.”

The coalition implies, but does not explicitly state, that Planned Parenthood, which also provides other services, has used the money to have abortions performed. And the foundation itself says it does “not provide any funding for abortions or for any activities outside the scope of our mission to eradicate breast cancer” Thus, whether any of the money was ever actually used to pay an abortion provider will probably never be known. But it seems unlikely.

Komen officials said Planned Parenthood has been given some grants in those geographic areas where Planned Parenthood “may be the only source of free or low-cost women’s health screening services (e.g., pap smears, mammograms, clinical breast exams).”

Foundation officials also said that some Komen affiliates “provide restricted grants to local Planned Parenthood clinics in order to provide vital breast health services for underserved women in their communities.”

Moreover, Komen grant applications “are solicited through an open request for proposals and reviewed by a committee that may include local physicians, community health professionals and breast health advocates.”

On the question of whether abortions may be linked to breast cancer, both sides marshal studies supporting their respective viewpoints. This part of the debate will probably continue ad infinitum, as long as abortion remains a hot-button political issue.

A respected organization, the federal, National Cancer Institute, has indicated there is no scientific link between the two.

More than 100 experts who study pregnancy and breast cancer risk concluded in February 2003, after a workshop convened by the institute, that having an abortion or miscarriage does not increase a woman's subsequent risk of developing breast cancer.

But in these kinds of debates, scientific evidence may mean little anyway, political positions are often so hardened as to be unmovable, no matter what evidence is put forward – and that, historically, has been the case with abortion. We can say, however, that common sense suggests promoting abortion would not serve the interests of the foundation, a prominent national group whose annual fund-raising walk-runs draw heavy participation throughout the country, including North Texas.

The foundation, quite obviously, is not going to support activities that would cause breast cancer.

In this respect, the logic of its critics does not make sense. If abortion were a cause of breast cancer, as pro-life groups contend, then the foundation should try to stop the practice; ergo, donations to groups that support woman's right to choose would seem unlikely.

Perhaps we should not dismiss outright the case made by Komen's critics on this issue, but it must be drawn far more tightly to win credibility.