Dr. Susan Love, groundbreaking breast cancer surgeon, activist, and author, dies at 75

By Bryan Marquard Globe Staff, Updated July 4, 2023, 7:13 p.m.

Dr. Susan Love, in Boston, in 1997. KNOTT, JANET GLOBE STAFF

One summer day in 1990, Dr. Susan Love stood in a Boston operating room next to a patient from Cape Cod as an oxygen mask was placed on the woman's face. Anesthetic flowed and the patient's eyes began to close.

"Don't worry about it," Dr. Love said, holding the woman's hand. "Everything's OK. Just fine ... deep breath."

Later on — after finishing the surgery and retrieving pathology reports on lymph nodes she had removed, which showed no signs that the cancer had spread — Dr. Love hurried to the recovery room so her voice would be the first heard when her patient awakened. Taking the woman's hand again, she enthused: "Hello! Everything looks great!"

A groundbreaking surgeon, author, and activist whose compassion and professional willingness to confront the status quo changed public perception of how breast cancer should be treated, Dr. Love was 75 when she died Sunday in her Los Angeles home.

The cause was a recurrence of leukemia, the Dr. Susan Love Foundation for Breast Cancer Research in California announced.

Early in her career, Dr. Love was the first female general surgeon on the staff at what was then Beth Israel Hospital, before being recruited to become the founding director of Faulkner Breast Centre. When it opened in 1988 at Faulkner Hospital, it was believed to be the first such center in the nation staffed entirely by women physicians.

She also co-wrote, with Karen Lindsey, the 1990 bestseller "Dr. Susan Love's Breast Book," which has been translated into several languages. Now in its seventh edition, it is considered a definitive text for patients and physicians alike.

The following year, she was among a small group of women who launched the National Breast Cancer Coalition — activists and organizations who advocate on behalf of increased government funding, research, and attention. On its website, the organization says it has "generated more than $4 billion new dollars for breast cancer research."

"Susan was not just a visionary leader, she was a dear friend to so many of us who became NBCC advocates," Fran Visco, the coalition's leader, said in a statement.

In 1992, Dr. Love left Boston to establish a center at what is now the David Geffen School of Medicine at the University of California, Los Angeles.

She directed what is now the Revlon/UCLA Breast Center, and stepped away her from surgical practice in 1996 to devote more time to seeking the cause of breast cancer. Dr. Love also taught for many years at UCLA.

"We will miss her irreverence, her ability to lead us down paths we never envisioned, her compassion, and her laughter," Visco said. "Not to mention her dancing."

A lively presence with patients, colleagues, and in media interviews, Dr. Love was as gifted at crafting metaphors as she was operating on patients.

She challenged traditional practices of male surgeons who dominated the breast cancer field decades ago and who often seemed to address breast cancer diagnoses with significant disfiguring surgeries.

Dr. Love disagreed and insisted on offering women information to make more informed choices.

There are instances, she told the Globe in 1982, in which a mastectomy to prevent the spread of breast cancer "is overkill — like amputating a leg to cure a hangnail."

"Slash, burn, and poison," she called her male colleagues' oft-held approach: radical mastectomies, aggressive radiation, and chemotherapy.

Instead, Dr. Love advocated, when possible, starting with lumpectomies as a way to preserve breast tissue.

"I think any breast removal is an amputation," she told the Globe in 1990. "You're cutting off a part of the body. And why is that any different than cutting off a leg or an arm? It is an amputation. Now, people don't like that word, because it sounds somewhat pejorative and like a drastic thing to do. It is. That's right. It is drastic."

Along with listening more intently and empathetically than other surgeons to her patients' fears and hopes, Dr. Love was part of a court case that opened adoption possibilities to others in the state's LGBTQ+ community.

In 1993, the state Supreme Judicial Court ruled that Dr. Love and her then-partner, Dr. Helen Cooksey, could jointly adopt their daughter, Katie. Dr. Love gave birth in 1988 to Katie, who was conceived with sperm donated by one of Cooksey's cousins.

"Helen and I are thrilled that the court has agreed to validate our family," Dr. Love told reporters in the office of the couple's lawyers.

Born in Long Branch, N.J., on Feb. 9, 1948, Susan Margaret Love was the oldest of five siblings.

Her father's work as a businessman took the family to Puerto Rico and Mexico, where she spent much of her childhood and youth.

"Susie was always extremely driven," her brother Michael, a screenwriter, producer, and director, told the Globe in 1990.

Inspired by the example of her schoolteacher nuns, Dr. Love joined a convent, but found she had different goals. "I wanted to save the world," she told The New York Times in 1994, "but they wanted to save their own souls."

She graduated from Fordham University in New York City with a bachelor's degree and received her medical degree from what is now the State University of New York Downstate College of Medicine in Brooklyn.

Her surgical residency at Beth Israel "was modeled after the military," she told the Times. "Most women who survived paid a price. They lost their marriages, or their minds. I did it by being totally out of touch with myself, a good old Irish Catholic."

Dr. Love's survivors include Cooksey, whom she married in California in 2004 and with whom she had been a couple for about four decades, and the couple's daughter, Katie.

The Love Foundation's announcement said plans for a memorial gathering are pending.

"The light that Susan shared with the world has touched so many, and the world will mourn her loss," Christopher Clinton Conway, the foundation's chief executive, said in a statement.

Her advocacy included the 2008 creation of the Love Research Army, which connects volunteers with clinical trials and now has about 390,000 supporters around the world, according to the foundation.

Dr. Love's other books included "Dr. Susan Love's Hormone Book" (1997), written with Lindsey and reissued as "Dr. Susan Love's Menopause & Hormone Book: Making Informed Choices."

Research on hormone replacement therapy, she told the Globe in 1997, is often contradictory, inconclusive, and often misrepresented in the media reports — a stance that put her at odds with many researchers and physicians.

In 2012, Dr. Love was giving a talk in San Francisco when, characteristically direct, she said researchers should be more empathetic with those diagnosed with cancer.

"The only difference between a researcher and a patient is a diagnosis," she said that day. "We're all patients."

A couple of months later, she was diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia.

"I think I'm more impatient now and in more of a hurry," she told the Times the following year, when she was in remission. "I've been reminded that you don't know how long you have. There are women being diagnosed every day. We don't have the luxury to sit around and come up with a new marketing scheme. We have to get rid of this disease, and there is no reason we can't do it."

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