

# Vet your breasts... it could save your life!



In any veterinary practice that employs eight or more women, there is a strong likelihood that at least one of them will be diagnosed with breast cancer during their lifetime. So says vet cardiologist *Anna Beber*, who is well aware of the statistical risk of developing the most common malignancy in female patients because she was that woman.

*John Bonner reports...*



It was more by good fortune than careful vigilance that Anna noticed a lump in her breast, which is why she wants to make sure that colleagues leave nothing to chance. "I went for a swim in December 2019 after a typically hectic day at work, but I got there quite late and there was no-one else around. I noticed a sticker on the changing room wall next to the mirror. It said: 'Check your breasts now' and when I did, I found the lump" she recalls.

Anna was familiar with the procedure for checking her breasts for any abnormal signs and says she probably did so about twice a year. "When I remembered but not regularly and while I did know that younger women could get breast cancer, it was not something I ever thought would happen to me. I was young – 33 years old at the time, I live a healthy and active lifestyle and there is no history of the disease in my family."

Following surgery and radiotherapy, Anna is back at work and the evidence suggests that being able to get treatment at an early stage of the disease has ensured its success. A 2011 Glasgow graduate, she is with the independent cardiac referral team HeartVets which provides clinical services, online telemedicine and interventional cardiac surgery for practices across the south west of England, Wales and the Midlands. For most of her shifts, Anna is based at Vale Referrals in north Gloucestershire.

From talking to friends, colleagues and fellow patients, Anna realized that she was not alone in having taken a fairly relaxed attitude to the risks from this particular disease and the importance of regular self-monitoring. Indeed, she had possibly been more thorough than most as some friends admitted to never having checked their own breasts. Meanwhile, some of the other women that were being treated at the same hospital said they had actually noticed changes in their breast tissue but had not associated this with cancer and they had received a late diagnosis as a result.

Anna has a lot of sympathy for those colleagues who are so involved with looking after their clients' animals that they forget to take care of themselves. "Given how busy and stressful life in the veterinary profession can



be, I wanted to do something to remind colleagues to find time to check themselves and to familiarize themselves with the signs of breast cancer. I wanted this to be at a time when it would be easy and convenient for them – I reckoned that putting up a poster in the bathroom would encourage them to check when they are changing their scrub top.”

After returning home from a radiotherapy session, Anna started sketching out ideas for the poster, drawing pictures of stick figures in scrub tops examining their breast tissue. While she had a clear vision of what she wanted to create, she had to accept that her artistic skills weren't quite up to the task. But she did know someone who could help – Katherine Kannon, an old friend who trained as an architect and is now working as a freelance illustrator in Berlin.

To Anna's delight, her friend readily agreed to work with her on ideas for the poster. "It had to be clear and get across the main point about the signs of breast cancer and the changes to look out for – but it also had to resonate with vets," she explains.

At the same time, Anna began working on her website [www.vetyourbreasts.com](http://www.vetyourbreasts.com), which contains information on the diagnosis and treatment of this condition. She also set up a link for donations that would support the distribution of the poster to practices

and vet schools across the country. Since then, through the efforts of her friends and colleagues and via the magic of social media, the campaign has snowballed. It has received backing from dozens of private and corporate practices, several of the UK vet schools, animal welfare charities like the PDSA, and from the veterinary media. It has also had an impact beyond the UK – Village Vets Ireland printed 100 posters for distribution to vet practices across the Republic and she has been contacted with requests to use the material from colleagues in countries such as New Zealand, Pakistan and Puerto Rico.

Eventually, Anna would like the poster to be displayed on the walls of every veterinary practice in the country. "While it may seem that a small poster in a changing room couldn't make much of a difference, it did for me and maybe this will make people stop and think."

She points out that there is a particular need for vigilance against the threat posed by this disease in the current climate. "Almost a million women have missed breast cancer screening as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This will sadly result in thousands of women with undetected breast cancer. Now more than ever, it is important to examine yourself for any changes and if you have any concerns, to get them checked out." 📌