



SEMI-POSTAL STAMPS AS HEALTH PROMOTION TOOLS. BREAST CANCER

Petya Boncheva, Desislava Vankova

Department of Social Medicine and Healthcare Organization, Faculty of Public Health, Medical University - Varna, Bulgaria.

ABSTRACT:

Introduction: The World Health Organization (WHO) launched the Global Breast Cancer Initiative (GBCI) in 2021 with a goal to reduce breast cancer (BC) mortality by 2.5% per year, saving the lives of 2.5 million women by 2040. WHO defines three key strategies of the GBCI: health promotion (HP) for early disease detection; timely diagnosis, and holistic management of BC.

The **purpose** of this study was to trace the history of the “Breast Cancer Research Stamp” (BCRS) as an HP tool to raise awareness and funds for BC research. The article is part of a series of research studies dedicated to the semi-postal stamps, which have an added financial value, collected for a specific health cause.

Methods: A literature review in 2024 of documents and scientific publications was conducted in PubMed and Google Scholar with the keywords “semi-postal stamp” and “BC”.

Results: The edition of the first BCRS in 1997 was a result of the energetic actions of three prominent advocates in the fight against BC: Dr. Balazs Bodai, Elizabeth Mullen and David Goodman. BCRS’s success was spectacular. By the end of 2005, \$47.9 million had been raised for BC research. Further, over 70 countries have issued their BCRS.

Conclusions: BCRS transcended national boundaries, achieving global recognition as a symbol of the collective fight against BC. Beyond its practical impact, BCRS represents a unique blend of art and advocacy, inspiring generations with its evocative and poetic call to action: “FUND THE FIGHT. FIND A CURE.”

Keywords: health promotion, breast cancer, semi-postal stamps, history of medicine,

INTRODUCTION

Cancer is a major public health challenge and the second leading cause of death worldwide [1]. Particularly, breast cancer is the most common cancer among the female population. In 2022, 2.3 million new cases were diagnosed in 185 countries, and the disease was deadly for 670,000 people [2]. In 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) has launched the Global Breast Cancer Initiative (GBCI). The goal is to reduce breast cancer mortality by 2.5% per year, saving the lives of 2.5 million women by 2040 [3]. To achieve this goal, WHO has defined three key strategies: health promotion for early disease detection; timely diagnosis and holistic management of breast cancer [4].

Health promotion as a key GBCI strategy covers sustainable political, educational and organizational actions that build personal resilience and empower people to control their lifestyle and the external environments that determine their health [5]. Specifically, improved health education and raised awareness regarding breast cancer are essential factors for effective secondary prevention, early diagnosis and timely treatment of the disease.

The semi-postal stamps have an added financial value, which is collected for a specific cause [6]. Through images and/or text, the semi-postal stamps carry certain messages, with the ambition of raising awareness and attracting public attention to significant issues. The semi-postal stamps have proven to be an effective tool for health education and health promotion, as well as for raising funds for research and treatment of many socially significant diseases [7, 8], such as breast cancer.

There are many stamps dedicated to cancer, specifically breast cancer [9]. The first semi-postal stamps for cancer were issued in Sweden in 1928. Three million stamps featuring King Gustav V were sold, raising over \$42,000 to combat cancer. The next year, in 1929, Denmark issued 1,865,000 stamps featuring the Danish crown and the Asclepius rod. The raised 90,000 kroner (\$25,000) went to the National Cancer Research Fund for scientific activities [10]. As a result, many other countries followed suit and issued their own cancer stamps [11].

The world’s first semi-postal stamp to build awareness of breast cancer and raise funds for research was the “Breast Cancer Research Stamp”, issued in the USA in 1998 [12]. Since then, more than 1.1 billion copies have

been sold, and over \$98 million has been raised by the end of October 2024 [13]. These are impressive results for the benefit of scientific research to combat cancer, which has provoked research interest and determined the direction of the current study.

The AIM of this study was to trace the history of the “Breast cancer research stamp”.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

A literature review of scientific publications was conducted in PubMed and Google Scholar with the keywords “semi-postal stamp” and “breast cancer”. Additionally, political documents, journalistic articles, materials from museums and philatelic websites were reviewed. The search was conducted in 2024.

RESULTS:

The first semi-postal stamp for breast cancer, called the “Breast cancer research stamp,” was preceded by the appearance of a stamp to raise awareness of the disease. The campaign was initiated by Diane Sackett Nannery, a retired postal worker who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1993. As a result of Nannery’s efforts and with the support of former US Senator Alphonse D’Amato, on June 15, 1996, the U.S. Postal Service printed a commemorative postal stamp to raise awareness of breast cancer. The stamp has the standard price of a first-class postal stamp of 32 cents [14,15]. The image is of a female silhouette from behind, on whose shoulder is placed a pink ribbon – a symbol of the disease. The inscription on the stamp reads “Breast Cancer Awareness” (fig. 1) [16]. The stamp was officially launched at a 5-kilometer marathon organized to fight breast cancer [14,15]. In 2004, Diane Nannery died from the disease [15].

Fig. 1. Breast Cancer Awareness Stamp. [16]



The “Breast cancer research stamp” is a result of the energetic actions of three prominent figures advocates in the fight against breast cancer: Dr. Balazs (Ernie) Bodai, Elizabeth (Betsy) Mullen and David Goodman [17].

When Dr. Balazs (Ernie) Bodai started his initiative in 1996, was at the age of 47, a breast cancer surgeon who had treated thousands of women with the disease at the Kaiser Foundation Sacramento. Dr. Bodai’s idea for the stamp was to raise awareness about breast cancer and raise funds for research on breast cancer. In 1996, he met with representatives of the Postmaster United States Postal Service and shared his idea for a semi-postal stamp that would sell for 33 cents, just 1 cent more than regular first-class postage stamps. The 1 cent revenue was to be used for breast cancer research. However, the proposal was flatly rejected. The refusal did not stop Dr. Bodai but motivated him to go further and lobby for normative regulations that support the issuance of the stamp. He sought political support by sending letters with his request to 48 women in the United States Congress and 8 women senators but did not receive a single response. Then he decided to meet with representatives of the US Congress personally. Over the course of two years, Dr Bodai traveled to Washington 14 times at his own expense, met with politicians, collected 250,000 signatures in support of the initiative, and received support from a number of prestigious organizations, including the American College of Surgeons, the National Cancer Institute, and the American Medical Association [18, 19].

Elizabeth (Betsy) Mullen and David Goodman supported Dr Bodai in this mission and actively advocated among the policy makers. Betsy Mullen (39-year-old breast cancer survivor) was diagnosed with aggressive breast cancer in 1992 and underwent mastectomy, reconstructive surgery, and six months of chemotherapy. To our knowledge, in 2022 she was the director of the national non-profit organization she founded, “Women’s Information Network Against Breast Cancer” (WIN ABC), for more than 11 years. She has been involved in Kaiser Permanente’s Breast Buddy Care Program in Southern California, providing support to women with breast cancer [19, 20, 21]. David Goodman lost his wife because of a breast cancer diagnosis [17].

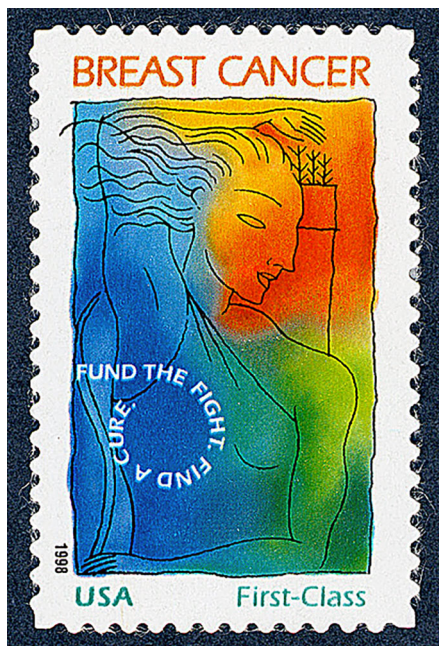
As a result of their tireless actions, in 1997 the US senators Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), Alfonse D’Amato (R-NY), and Lauch Faircloth (R-NC), and US representatives Susan Molinari (R-NY), Vic Fazio (D-CA), and Charles W. Norwood (R-GA) became the formal supporters of the legislation act for the creation of the stamp [17, 18].

On August 13, 1997, US President Bill Clinton signed the “Stamp Out Breast Cancer Act” (The Stamp Act) [22]. The law provides that 70 percent of the proceeds from the stamp surcharge be directed to the National Institutes of Health for breast cancer research and 30 percent to the Department of Defence for the same purpose [17, 23]. This is the first semi-postal stamp in the US [24].

The designing process of the stamp was managed by Ethel Kessler, U.S. Postal Service Art Director, who was a breast cancer survivor [24]. According to the original idea,

the semi-postal stamp was supposed to include the image of the pink ribbon from the 1996 stamp issued as a symbol of the disease. Kessler abandoned this idea because the initial designs turned out to be too depressive. She turned to the illustrator Whitney Sherman, who had prepared several sketches, but one of them stood out from the rest. The image was a silhouette of a woman raising her right arm in the position recommended by medical professionals for self-examination of the breast. The symbolism referred to the ancient Greek goddess of the hunt, Artemis, at a moment when she is ready for battle - she reaches with her right hand to remove an arrow from the quiver hanging on her shoulder, and holds a bow in her left hand. A target is placed on the breast, which in the final version was replaced with an inscription around the breast "FUND THE FIGHT. FIND A CURE". The inscription "Breast Cancer" is placed at the top of the stamp. The woman radiates strength, confidence and determination to survive, and the colours flow into yellow, green, blue, red and purple (fig. 2) [16, 17, 24, 25]. The price of the stamp is 40 cents, 8 cents higher than that of a first-class postage stamp [12].

Fig. 2. Breast Cancer Research Stamp. [24]



On July 29, 1998, the Breast cancer research stamp was issued at a White House event hosted by First Lady Hillary Clinton with Senator Dianne Feinstein, Congressman Vic Fazio, Postmaster General William Henderson and Elizabeth Mullen [21].

The success of the stamp exceeded all expectations. By the end of 2005, 678 million copies had been sold, and \$47.9 million had been raised for breast cancer research [14]. On September 30, 2014, the stamp was reissued in the same form, with the year changed to 2014, at a price of 85 cents [26]. By 2015, the Breast Cancer Research stamp had become the best-selling stamp of all time in the United States, even surpassing the Elvis

Presley stamp in sales [27].

The US Congress has repeatedly renewed the "Stamp Out Breast Cancer Act", extending the authority of the U.S. Postal Service to continue issuing the Breast cancer research stamp [18], the most recent extension being on December 20, 2019, through December 31, 2027 [17]. By special provision, the law requires the National Institutes of Health to submit an annual report on the use of funds received from stamp sales to Congress and the Government Accountability Office [17, 23].

Dr. Bodai has been actively working to expand international breast cancer research. As of 2014, over 70 countries have issued semi-postal stamps for breast cancer research, early detection, and control. In 2015, Dr Bodai was honored for his outstanding achievements in the fight against breast cancer by the US Congress with H.R.1925 - To award a Congressional Gold Medal to Dr Balazs "Ernie" Bodai in recognition of his many outstanding contributions to the Nation, including a tireless commitment to breast cancer research [27].

CONCLUSIONS:

Breast cancer is no longer an unrelenting scourge, thanks to numerous clinically driven innovations and public health initiatives. The achievements of surgery and modern target therapies are among the major drivers of the raising survival rates among women diagnosed with breast cancer. Additionally, active health education and health promotion campaigns have raised health literacy among women in risk groups. These societal efforts resulted in successful screening programs and diagnosed patients at an earlier curable stage of breast cancer.

The "Breast cancer research stamp" emerged as an extraordinarily successful health promotion initiative, embodying a comparatively modest but yet profoundly impactful idea that significantly advanced breast cancer research in the late 20th century.

This project became a notable success for numerous reasons. It effectively leveraged the full spectrum of health promotion strategies, combining robust support from high-level health policies with widespread community engagement through stamp sales. It also fostered health education and encouraged behavior changes, such as self-examinations and early diagnosis.

The "Breast cancer research stamp" transcended national boundaries, achieving global recognition as a symbol of the collective fight against breast cancer. Beyond its practical impact, the stamp represents a unique blend of art and advocacy, inspiring generations with its evocative and poetic call to action: "FUND THE FIGHT. FIND A CURE."

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One of the authors, D. Vankova, dedicates this research to three friends who have triumphed over a breast cancer diagnosis - resilient women who have successfully restarted their lives. Remarkably, two of them are now caring grandmothers. Love and respect!

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Address for correspondence:

Petya Boncheva
Department of Social Medicine and Health Care Organization, Faculty of Public Health, Medical University of Varna;
55, Marin Drinov Str., 9002 Varna, Bulgaria.
E-mail: boncheva.petia@gmail.com,