

Time to rethink pink

On Mother's Day next month, Major League baseball fans will be seeing pink. Everywhere.

Pink bats, hats, wristbands, and lots of ribbons.

Like many other big businesses, baseball has gotten on base to help raise breast cancer awareness. And though October has been designated Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the marketing of pink



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products is now ubiquitous year-round as companies donate a portion of their pink profits to breast cancer research.

But there's a growing number of women, including a cadre of breast cancer survivors, raising a stink over the use of pink. Critics say the pink ribbon campaign has become more about marketing than producing better health outcomes, giving rise to the term "pinkwashing."

It's a perspective explored in the documentary "Pink Ribbons, Inc." The film will be screened at 1 p.m. May 13 at the Barnstable Senior Center, thanks to the collaborative efforts of the [Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition](#), GreenCAPE and the Silent Spring Institute.

"We are not opposed to people donating, or even companies donating, to support breast

cancer organizations," GreenCAPE director Sue Phelan told me. "But there's millions of dollars in pink-ribbon items being sold to people who think their purchases will really help end breast cancer."

The now co-opted awareness campaign, Phelan said, is no longer effective because "very little money from each of those purchases actually goes to breast cancer."

"The emphasis has been on awareness," she said, "but is there anyone who isn't aware at this point?"

Phelan may be right. I'd wager that most people know that breast cancer is among the most common cancers affecting women, with close to 60,000 women dying of the disease each year in the United States alone.

A review by Mark Jenkins for National Public Radio called the film a "provocative

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yet far from definitive" critique of "breast cancer culture." Still, Jenkins noted, "fewer than 30 percent of patients have a genetic proclivity for the illness, which indicates that most cases stem from environmental causes – yet relatively little attention is paid to prevention, or to chemicals that mimic estrogen and disrupt the human endocrine system."

EMPHASIS ON PREVENTION

For Phelan, who has already seen the documentary, the big takeaway, she said, is that "the emphasis should be on prevention."

"Rather than pink ribbon items, people could get involved with breast cancer organizations or give money directly," she said.

Phelan said the film also does a good job highlighting another overlooked facet of breast cancer research and treatment. "There are a lot of women who don't have access

to treatment."

And given that women are such an influential consumer group – purchasing an estimated 80 percent of all consumer products and making most of the major household purchasing decisions – it's important for women to know "some companies that claim to be concerned are still producing products that are actually linked to the disease and are now profiting from something they helped create," she said.

Avon and Yoplait are two companies critics hold up as examples of "pinkwashing." In Avon's case, critics argue, some of its cosmetics contain suspected cancer-causing agents. And Yoplait, in the past, had used milk in its yogurt that contained bovine growth hormone.

'DIVERTING AND PACIFYING'

Initially, Phelan said, the pink-ribbon awareness campaign was a good idea, and it served its purpose well. But now that awareness is widespread, the constant focus on pink is "diverting and pacifying" the public into thinking progress is being made when the incidence of breast cancer is on the rise.

"As bigger companies have gotten on board, it's been watered down," she said. "That's why we call it 'pinkwashing.' It's more of a bottom-line issue for them, and it diverts our attention from the root causes of the disease."

"Pink ribbons are everywhere. They make us all feel good," Cheryl Osimo, Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition executive director and Silent Spring Institute founder, told me.

"I'm not saying they don't do great things, but we need to ask: Who is this really benefiting? Wouldn't it be great if they could contribute some of that money to help prevent the disease in the first place?" said Osimo, a breast cancer survivor.



CAUSE TO CELEBRATE

After the film, from 2:30 to 3 p.m., Phelan and Osimo will hold a question-and-answer session with the audience. They also plan to celebrate the May birthday of the late Rachel Carson, the scientist, part-time Woods Hole resident and author of the popular book "Silent Spring," which inspired the founding of the institute and raised planetary awareness of the dangers of pesticides on human health.

Even aside from the anecdotal evidence of the effect pink has had on football teams that use the University of Iowa's pink-colored locker room, or the calming influence pink has on inebriated inmates locked up in the drunk tank, psychologists and marketing executives have long known how various colors can be used to manipulate human behavior.

I wonder what psychologists think of a color being used so much it can undermine its intended effect, where a pink-ribbon campaign has some seeing red.

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NO MORE PINK RIBBONS?

What: Screening of the documentary film "Pink Ribbons, Inc.," followed by Q & A session hosted by the [Massachusetts Breast Cancer Coalition](#), GreenCAPE and the Silent Spring Institute

When: 1 p.m. Monday, May 13

Where: Barnstable Senior Center, 825 Falmouth Road, Hyannis

Admission: Free and open to the public, though organizers ask moviegoers to RSVP to info@greencape.org