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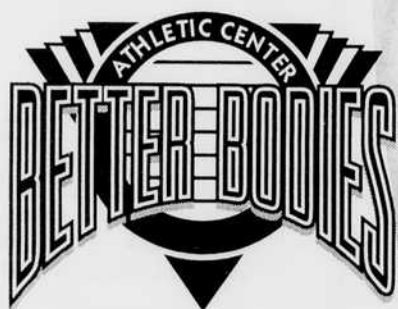
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Murphy Brown to battle breast cancer

By David Bauder
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The makers of "Murphy Brown" are giving breast cancer patients a new emotional outlet as they follow Candice Bergen's character on a road they know well, survivors say.

"I think it does tremendous good. I know from my own experience that it makes women feel less alone," said NBC correspondent Betty Rollin, whose best-selling book about her breast cancer, "First, You Cry," was made into a movie 20 years ago.

More than 1,000 people — 10 times the normal amount — called the American Cancer Society's hot line during four hours around last week's episode of the CBS show, when Brown decides to have a lumpectomy instead of a mastectomy.

The hot line number was flashed at the end of Wednesday's episode, and the cancer society has produced a pamphlet on breast cancer with the character's picture. Other support groups are trying to get out information about the disease through CBS affiliates.

Besides portraying Brown's fear in the face of the diagnosis — she has trouble even saying the word "cancer" — the show will explore the feelings of her friends, ranging from stifling attention to fear of even mentioning the disease. The breast-cancer theme began with the new season three weeks ago.

"From what I've seen so far, the producers and writers have done a good job in being accurate about the information they are portraying to the public," said Kristina Pavlou, a breast cancer survivor and official of Y-ME, a support group for patients in Chicago.

At one point, Brown asks about her future by wondering if she should buy green bananas. The question echoes the title of a book, "I Still Buy Green Bananas," that Pavlou's group recommends to people with cancer.

The show's producers did their homework. They talked with doctors and patients at a cancer center in California.

They're aware of the power of TV: when the "General Hospital" character Monica Quartermaine was diagnosed with breast cancer

two years ago, viewers called wondering if there was a support group in fictional Port Charles, said Susan Carter of the Susan Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.

Breast cancer survivors are pleased that "Murphy Brown" illustrated how doctors often disagree on whether a lumpectomy or mastectomy is best, emphasizing that the final decision rests with the woman.

The show has won Bergen an armful of Emmys, but it's not nearly as influential as when former Vice President Dan Quayle criticized it because Brown gave birth out of wedlock.

This year, the ratings are respectable after it moved from Monday nights to Wednesday nights. It is second in its time slot behind ABC's new "Dharma and Greg" and finished 31st among 104 prime-time shows last week, according to Nielsen Media Research.

The show will do its most good if it can persuade women who have put off getting a mammogram — like Murphy Brown — to get one, Pavlou said.

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