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She turned a diagnosis to a cause

Breast cancer survivor began Mexico project

The Boston Globe



Julio Frenk, dean of the Harvard School of Public Health, and his wife, Felicia Knaul, will talk about early detection tonight. (George Rizer/ Globe Staff)

By James F. Smith
Globe Staff / April 14, 2009

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Felicia Marie Knaul, a Harvard-trained global health economist living in Mexico, was 41 when she received a diagnosis of breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy. She responded by launching a nationwide early-detection project for breast cancer and sharing her own story of hair loss, chemotherapy, reconstructive surgery, and emotional survival.

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This evening, when Knaul appears at a forum at the Harvard School of Public Health to discuss her work in Mexico, she'll have a champion on stage with her. The host will be her husband, Julio Frenk, a leading global health policy specialist who became dean of Harvard's School of Public Health in January.

"I have an ally in many, many senses," Knaul said.

"All of the work to start the program, and most of the presentations, we did as a couple, with Julio speaking very openly about his experiences as a partner of a woman with breast cancer, and how to provide the dignity a woman needs, especially when she's going through something like this."

Frenk said he felt the forum would be an appropriate way for him and Knaul to introduce themselves to the Boston medical community because the personal issue they confronted as a couple is so closely aligned with his policy priorities as he takes the helm at the graduate school.

"All my life I have studied the health system. It's been very revealing for me to be on the other side, on the receiving side, and to feel what a patient has to go through in diagnosis and treatment. It's given me a whole different perspective of my patient - the health system," Frenk said in an interview.

As Mexico's national health minister from 2000 to 2006, Frenk engineered an ambitious overhaul of public health insurance, creating a program that provided systematic coverage for the first time to the poorest half of Mexico's population of 109 million. Long before his wife's diagnosis, Frenk also enacted policy changes that made mammograms widely available to women 40 and older.

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He said health specialists had long assumed that the biggest cancer threat to women in Mexico was cervical cancer. But Knaul, chief economist for the Mexican Foundation for Health, co-authored a 2008 research study showing breast cancer to have overtaken cervical cancer as a killer of women in Mexico.

"It was Felicia, motivated by her own disease, who actually graphed the timeline, and showed that in 2005 those two lines had actually crossed," Frenk said. "It took Felicia to grab those two trends and reveal something that no one expected."

Frenk left government to become a senior fellow in the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as executive president of the Carso Health Institute, the Mexican foundation created by billionaire Carlos Slim Helú. The Carso institute is supporting Knaul's breast-cancer nonprofit. [Continued...](#)

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