

WENDY WILCOX '94

Tackling Health Disparities

When it comes to breast cancer in New York City, there are still disparities in care for communities of color. Wendy Wilcox, MD '94, a clinical system lead for women's health and chair of obstetrics and gynecology for NYC Health + Hospitals/Kings County, has practiced OB/GYN and women's health with a focus on achieving health equity and eliminating disparities across populations throughout her career.

After earning a bachelor's degree in biomedical ethics from Brown University, Dr. Wilcox attended SUNY Upstate Medical University and completed her residency at Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn.

"There were women's care counselors that were placed in the dorms to help students get to the right resources in case of date rape, or to help inform about public health topics like STIs, how to stay healthy, or how to identify eating disorders. I became intrigued, not thinking that this would inform what I do later," says Wilcox.



Wendy Wilcox, MD '94, is chair of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at NYC Health + Hospitals/Kings County.

"In that rotation, I learned that I liked talking to my patients—you talk to the parents. I really enjoyed a lot of teaching and informing. As I was moving over to women's health, it's such a wide-open field—it just drew me in."

Wilcox became an attending at Montefiore Medical Center, which led to her being director of her medical group and assistant professor in OB/GYN at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Recently, she was named co-chair for Governor Cuomo's Taskforce on Maternal Mortality and Disparate Racial Outcomes, which recommended the newly formed New York State Maternal Mortality Review Committee.

In her experience, Wilcox notices that those who are coming for their annual check-ups and mammographies are generally already engaged in their health and tend to follow the recommended practices. The problem comes with those who aren't seeking treatment, particularly those who are African American or are of African descent, populations at a higher risk of dying from breast cancer.

"There is still a mistrust of the medical community for valid reasons," says Wilcox. "Historically, we can look back and see many, many examples of how African Americans and immigrants have been the victims of some really horrific medical experiments. African American women are much more likely to die of breast cancer than Caucasian women because they are generally diagnosed at a later stage and are more likely to have triple-negative breast

cancer. The gap is widening where there was a disparity before."

Triple negative breast cancer, which shows no estrogen receptors, progesterone receptors, and excess HER2 protein, accounts for 10 to 15 percent of breast cancer and has a low survival rate. It is common for African American women under the age of 40, or women with the BRCA1 mutation.

Multiple health organizations recommend that women start getting regular mammograms at the age of 40. In Wilcox's experience, she finds that many women aren't getting their mammograms because they think the procedure is more painful than it actually is.

While there are some genetic factors that can lead to the development of breast cancer, Wilcox says that maintaining overall health can help reduce risk factors for developing breast cancer. Quitting smoking, managing weight, and staying away from processed foods can help reduce the risk for women at any age, while women of reproductive age can breast-feed to reduce their risk.

"The healthier one is in general, the healthier one will be when looking at certain diseases," she says. "Eating healthy, eating correct amounts of fruits and vegetables, exercising, trying to avoid refined and processed foods and sugars, reducing alcohol intake" can all make a difference," she says.

Wilcox stresses that breast cancer is a life-time risk. "We may not be as concerned about our nutritional intake, but the older one gets, the higher the chances of having breast cancer and it increases in menopause. Being thoughtful of maintaining overall health is good for your breasts."

—Emily Davenport

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