For Women Only: Appropriate Treatment for Heart Disease

review by Irene Alleger

From the Heart: A Woman's Guide to Living Well with Heart Disease
by Kathy Kastan, LCW, MAEd; President, WomenHeart: The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease
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At age forty, Kathy Kastan began to experience symptoms associated with heart disease, but she was misdiagnosed three times before a cardiologist did a treadmill test with an EKG, which showed a blockage. Ultimately, she had bypass surgery, a full year after her initial symptoms began. This is a common scenario for midlife women with heart disease.

Until the mid-1990s, women were not included in heart-related clinical trials, and even now women are under-represented in heart-related research—they comprise only 25% of the participants. As a result, most doctors still treat women using diagnostic guidelines and treatments developed for men. Consequently, many women are misdiagnosed, because their symptoms—age of onset, hormonal issues, and the size of women’s blood vessels—are all different those associated with men.

The author’s experience with heart disease was the basis for From the Heart, and although she advocates changes in how women understand heart disease, most of the book reads like it was written by the American Heart Association (AHA). Unfortunately, there are thousands of women in this country who are misdiagnosed, have delayed diagnosis, or don’t receive the appropriate treatment for their heart disease. Kathy Kastan’s book will undoubtedly be helpful to many of them, but most of the recommendations and treatments are from the AHA; in other words, the approach is strictly according to standard practice.

After recounting her own story, the author jumps right into “Beginning the Recovery Process,” starting with what happens when you go home from the hospital. She stresses the importance of the crucial first steps: cardiac rehabilitation and medication. Because women are referred to rehabilitation less often by their cardiologists, for this “life-saving” intervention, patients must become informed enough to insist on this referral. Here, and throughout the book, other women’s experiences are related, and several recount the effort it took to get the referral from their doctors. These stories are effective in illustrating the need for patient advocacy. The short section on medications, however, was of little value, consisting of “organizing your medications,” “developing a daily routine,” and “don’t be afraid to talk about costs.” Not a single word about the drugs’ efficacy, side effects, or other options.

The patients’ emotional and mental health is stressed throughout the book, possibly because Ms. Kastan is a psychotherapist. Some of the discussion seems helpful, but I was disappointed by the section on “Depression and Heart Disease.” The emphasis is on depression after a heart attack, which is to be expected, but almost nothing in regard to depression before the heart attack. Depression and stress loom large in women’s lives today due to divorce, career pressures, single parenting, etc. Women have taken on earning a living while continuing to be caretakers. None of the social or cultural issues affecting women’s health are mentioned in From the Heart. Nor are any (non-drug) options given for the depression—only pharmaceutical drugs are discussed.

Some peeves: in listing risk factors, the author includes high cholesterol, but no mention of homocysteine, and the few paragraphs on diet were of little help, mentioning only the need to limit salt and reduce cholesterol. And—surprise! —the Heart Attack Warning Signs and Symptoms are tucked into the section on exercise, almost as an afterthought.

Some good things in From the Heart: the section on getting a second opinion is excellent and so important, as is the chapter, “Listening to Your Body.” A section on advocacy at the end of the book has a lot of important information for women with heart disease, such as the rise in incidence of women’s mortality from heart disease: “In terms of total deaths, according to the Alliance for Aging Research, heart disease has claimed the lives of more women than men every year since 1984. That may be due in part to the fact that women are less likely to recognize a heart event and seek treatment.”

I’m sure many women can benefit from this informative book. I only wish the author had widened her net to include more real research, risk assessments, and a broader view of heart disease that includes spirituality.

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