

By Ruth Ostrow

A few years ago I lost a close girlfriend to cancer. It was a gruelling experience and one that I would not wish on my worst enemy. She was brave and dignified, trying all the treatments available to her, both conventional and unconventional. But it was an uphill battle.

She would spend time meditating, looking to find some inner peace in a bid to calm the disease raging through her body.

And there was always hope in her eyes, in her voice, even as she kept a diary telling her youngest child everything she would not be able to say to her daughter as the little girl was growing up.

There were words of wisdom that a mum tells you daily: "Always clean your teeth"; little anecdotes: "This is how I felt the day you were born ... ", "I forgot to tell you your grandparents were ... ", "These are some of the funny things you used to say as a baby ... " There were poignant pictures stuck in alongside cut-out articles, poems, baby hair, bric-a-brac. A treasure the little girl could hold on to as a sad replacement for her mumma's warm arms.

During that time I also lost my young cousin to cancer; again, a little girl was left motherless. I watched the heart-wrenching scenes between mother and child in the hospital as the disease progressed.

I am stifling tears as I write this but feel I must because I can't believe the government is being so intransigent on helping desperate women have access to Herceptin, the newest drug for breast cancer. A study has found the drug reduces the risk of HER2 positive breast cancer returning by 46 per cent. Yet it is subsidised only for women with latestage breast cancer, not those who could be helped earlier.

At up to \$70,000 a year for the drug, families are selling everything they own to try to keep their mum alive, and some must face the tragedy of knowing a horrible death might have been preventable. But federal Health Minister Tony Abbott recently told the media more evidence was needed before Herceptin could be considered for listing on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme - a process that could take at least a year.

Suddenly the Government has become shy when it comes to taking a risk with taxpayers' money. Yet it quite happily took a punt on spending millions on its failed advertising blitz to sell workplace reforms.

Time to ask: do we want our tax dollars spent taking the sort of risks that help the Government look good, or in making bold efforts to save women's lives?

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