

Dr. Susan Love, Surgeon and Breast Health Advocate, Dies at 75

One of the world's most visible public faces in the war on breast cancer, she helped reshape both the doctor's role and the patient's.



Dr. Susan Love in 2013. She realized early on that the fight against breast cancer would entail political as well as medical battles, and she was well armed for both. Credit...Michal Czerwonka for The New York Times

By [Margalit Fox](#)

Published July 3, 2023 Updated July 5, 2023

Dr. Susan Love, a surgeon, author, researcher and activist who was for decades one of the world's most visible public faces in the war on breast cancer, died on Sunday at her home in Los Angeles. She was 75.

The cause was a recurrence of leukemia, said Allie Cormier, the chief marketing officer at the [Dr. Susan Love Foundation for Breast Cancer Research](#).

Ubiquitous, energetic, forthright (some critics said brash) and at times controversial, Dr. Love, it was generally agreed, helped reshape both the doctor's role and the patient's with respect to the treatment of breast cancer, which kills more than 43,000 women in the United States annually.

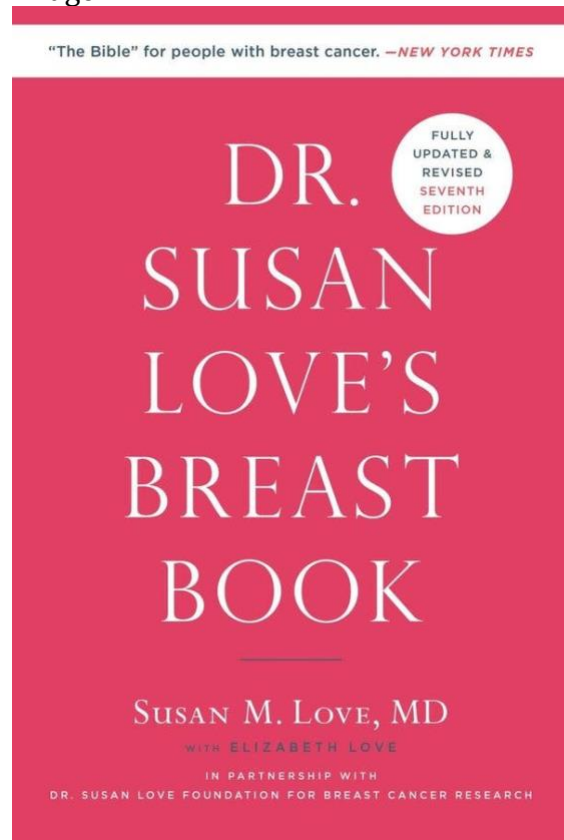
A former faculty member at the medical schools of Harvard and the University of California, Los Angeles, Dr. Love was a founder of the [National Breast Cancer Coalition](#), an advocacy group, in 1991. At her death, she was chief visionary officer of the Dr. Susan Love Foundation, a nonprofit organization that conducts and finances breast cancer research.

Though Dr. Love retired from active surgical practice in 1996, she remained influential through her writings, her lectures and her many television appearances.

She was known in particular for a book for lay readers, “[Dr. Susan Love’s Breast Book](#),” written with Karen Lindsey. Originally published in 1990 and now in its sixth edition, it has sold nearly half a million copies and has long been a de facto bible for breast cancer patients. A seventh edition is scheduled to be published this fall.

She was herself a central figure in a well-received nonfiction book, “[To Dance With the Devil](#)” (1997), an account by Karen Stabiner of the fight against breast cancer.

Image



“Dr. Susan Love’s Breast Book,” originally published in 1990, has long been considered a de facto bible for breast cancer patients. A seventh edition is set to be released this fall. Dr. Love — who began her medical career as a general surgeon and had previously planned to be a Roman Catholic nun — realized early on that the fight against breast cancer would entail political as well as medical battles. By temperament and training, she seemed well armed for both.

She did not suffer fools gladly, and her opinions often pushed against the tide of medical orthodoxy. In an era when surgeons were overwhelmingly male and deference by their female patients was still expected, she exhorted women to ask hard questions about their treatment.

Where tradition favored cutting, Dr. Love favored conservation. She frequently denounced a standard late-20th-century treatment protocol — mastectomy, radiation and chemotherapy — as “slash, burn and poison,” instead advocating lumpectomy followed by radiation whenever possible.

“Wanting to keep your breast is not about vanity,” she said in an interview with [Technology Review magazine](#) in 1993. “It’s about being intact as a person.”

Dr. Love was also adamant about what she saw as the limited utility of mammograms in detecting cancer in younger women. (Younger women’s breast tissue is denser and therefore less likely to yield visible clues.) Where annual mammograms have long been recommended for women over 40, she argued that most women can wait until they are 50, a stance that has not found universal favor with the medical community. (This May, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, alarmed by an increase in breast cancer diagnoses among younger women, recommended that women start getting regular mammograms at 40 rather than treating it as an individual decision until age 50.)

In the 1990s, amid the mass entry into middle age of women of the baby-boom generation, Dr. Love ignited controversy with her less-than-enthusiastic appraisal of hormone replacement therapy, then routinely recommended to treat menopausal symptoms. Her position was vindicated some years later, when the therapy was found to increase the risk of breast cancer, heart disease and strokes.

She did few things by half measures. After realizing as a young doctor that she was a lesbian, she chose to come out of the closet at a time when being openly gay carried grave professional and personal risks. She felt an obligation to do so, she said, so she could serve as a role model for others.

Her vision for breast cancer was no less expansive. What she ultimately wanted, she often said, was not so much to cure the disease as to vanquish it altogether by isolating its causes and pre-empting them at a cellular level.

As plain-spoken as Dr. Love could be in public, she was known for the immense private tenderness she displayed toward her patients. Many news-media profiles of her recounted her habit of standing alongside a patient just before surgery began, holding her hand and talking softly to her as the anesthesia took effect.

Image



Dr. Love in 2008 appearing on “The View.” Though she retired from active surgical practice in 1996, she remained influential in the areas of breast cancer research and treatment, including through television appearances. Credit...Steve Fenn/ABC
Susan Margaret Love was born in Long Branch, N.J., on Feb. 9, 1948. Her father, James Arthur Love, was a salesman for an industrial manufacturer, and she grew up first in Puerto Rico and then in Mexico, where his job took the family. Her mother was Margaret Connick Schwab.

After two years at the [College of Notre Dame of Maryland](#), she entered the convent of the [School Sisters of Notre Dame](#) in New York City. But she bristled at its confines and left after a few months.

She finished her bachelor’s degree at [Fordham University](#), earned an M.D. from the [Downstate College of Medicine](#) of the State University of New York in 1974 and did her surgical residency at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. (She also received an M.B.A. from U.C.L.A. in 1998.)

Acutely conscious of being a woman in a male-dominated medical specialty, Dr. Love made a vow, she recalled in an [interview with People magazine in 1994](#): “I am not going to let them turn me into a breast surgeon.”

“I could do the big operations just as well as they could,” she said.

But the breast patients came anyway, referred by male surgeons disinclined to take them on.

“I started to realize how women weren’t getting information,” Dr. Love told People. “If they came in with a lump or what they thought was a lump, the doctor would say, ‘Don’t worry your little head about that, dear.’ Most of these patients were scared to death. I realized I could make a contribution.”

She became an assistant clinical professor of surgery at [Harvard](#) in 1987. The next year she founded the Faulkner Breast Center, a Boston clinic whose medical staff was almost entirely female.

In 1992, Dr. Love joined the [David Geffen School of Medicine](#) at U.C.L.A. and established a clinic, the U.C.L.A. Breast Center, which she directed. (Now known as the [Revlon/U.C.L.A. Breast Center](#), it is a hub for treatment and research.)

Over time, her teeming schedule of interviews and public appearances, and the absences they involved, caused tension among colleagues at the breast center. She resigned from the center in 1996, though she continued to teach part time at U.C.L.A., where at her death she was a volunteer clinical professor.

Dr. Love became associated with the Santa Barbara Breast Cancer Institute, a research center, in the mid-1990s. Now based in Santa Monica, Calif., it was renamed after her in 2004.

The foundation’s projects include the [Love Research Army](#) (formerly the Love/Avon Army of Women), an initiative begun by Dr. Love that recruits volunteers from around the world to participate in breast-cancer studies; to date, more than 360,000 people have enrolled, including some men interested in learning about the disease.

Dr. Love is survived by her wife, Dr. Helen Sperry Cooksey, a surgeon, whom she married in San Francisco in 2004 during the brief period when same-sex marriages were being performed there, before a California ballot proposition made them illegal in 2008. Also surviving is their daughter, Katie Patton-LoveCooksey, whose adoption by her two mothers in 1993 — Dr. Love was the biological mother; both women reared her from birth — was the first granted to a same-sex couple in Massachusetts. In addition, Dr. Love is survived by two sisters, Christine Adcock and Elizabeth Love, and a brother, Michael James Love.

Today, about [a quarter-million new cases of breast cancer](#) are diagnosed each year. Though the disease has a higher survival rate than in the past, its cause has not been

identified definitively, and the pre-emptive strike of which Dr. Love dreamed is yet to be.

A technique devised by Dr. Love, known as [ductal lavage](#), can screen patients for an elevated risk of breast cancer. Ductal lavage flushes out cells from the breast's milk ducts, where breast cancer often originates, so that they may be analyzed for abnormalities that suggest an elevated risk of the disease. But the technique is cumbersome, time-consuming and expensive, and it is not widely used.

Dr. Love's other books include "Dr. Susan Love's Hormone Book" (1997, with Ms. Lindsey), reissued in 2003 as "Dr. Susan Love's Menopause and Hormone Book."

If in the course of her work Dr. Love antagonized some members of her profession — a collateral consequence, as she saw it, if not an inevitable one.

"One of the comments that I value the most came from one of my colleagues in Boston," Dr. Love told The Montreal Gazette in 1996. "He always thought of me as being the kid in '[The Emperor's New Clothes](#),' the one who's saying, 'Hey, wait a minute, there's no clothes there.' And that's the role that I enjoy the most."