Fit mice, fit women? Or fit to be tied?

October 11, 2017 Bryn breast cancer, fit, fitness, geneticization, health, women Edit

Blog

Chercheurse en résidence / Scholar in Residence

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Publié/Published: 11 Oct 2017

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Conflit d'intérêts	Conflicts of Interest
Aucun déclaré	None to declare
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The headlines (How inherited fitness may affect breast cancer risk) suggest that being "fit," as a way to reduce the risks of breast cancer, is not merely being active, but also about what genes affecting "fitness" one inherits.

No, this isn't only another example of geneticization, which of course it is and certainly seems to be from the headline. But no less worse: it's again another extrapolation from rodents to humans. Both of these processes just never seem to end; they only expand. And put women's health at true risk.

So maybe some rats running on treadmills in their cages have, after several generations of these efforts and lots of selected breeding, offspring that vary in breast cancer risk according to whether they were born from high fitness lineages or from low: but so what? Should we care? Or perhaps we should care to the extent that this latest "you have to do" erases the urgent discussion of what "should" we do — and why if we really want to lower the risks and incidence of breast cancer. (And erases, too, who should decide.)

It is so very easy to gloss the science and hide the social and structural determinants of so many conditions, breast cancer included. But for decades, huge funds have been devoted to refining the sciences of breast cancer and of high tech pharmaceutical treatments, and so little, if any, into seriously removing, or even at least reducing or exploring, the environmental, occupational, social and economic reasons that make women. some more so than others, vulnerable to developing this disease — all diseases, in fact.

October, the annual "pink ribbon month," is off and running. But women are still left behind when treatment and screening — the heavy-weight messages to the public this month, all months perhaps — deflect attention from true primary prevention. Posing as "caring" companies, well-heeled capitalist CEOs offer to give a pittance to breast cancer groups in alliance with them, try to make consumers think they are doing "good," that they are "running (or walking) for the cure." But their corporate coffers are closed for those community-based organizations devoted to women's health and breast cancer groups. And not only because the best of these groups reject alliances with pharmaceutical, cosmetic, and other industries that are actually parts of the problems that put women at risk. But because all such handouts come with a price that can jeopardize the independence of these groups. At the same time, groups that refuse potentially tainted funding are also being starved by neoliberal policies that keep cutting public funding for their work, thereby being collectively kept "unfit" to fill their important roles of education, advocacy, and activism.

Fitness matters, but we need true fitness. Authentic and healthful fitness means that groups and individuals have the full resources needed to thrive. These include, unsurprisingly, an end to their impoverishment, to the marginalization that has too many women living (like caged rats?) in health-harming homes and working treadmill-like just to make ends try to meet in health-harming jobs, and without access to holistic health care.... and so much more.

Let's not pink wash fitness to the benefit of genetics and biomedicine and profit making corporations, but, instead, truly offer what women need, want, and deserve.

Rats may not complain about their circumstances, but women can and must — and all allies must join them.

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ISSN 1923-2799

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