Letters to the Editor
AARP The Magazine
601 E St. NW
Washington DC 20049

Dear AARP Magazine Editors,

This letter is in response to your article on “Sheryl Crow and Melissa Etheridge Beat Cancer and Heartbreak” in the October/November issue of AARP magazine. In the accompanying graphic “How They Beat Cancer”, Melissa Etheridge is quoted as saying “I have the BRCA2 gene but don’t encourage women to get tested. Genes can be turned on and off. I turned my gene on with my very poor diet.” This statement reflects a misunderstanding of the role of the BRCA2 gene in cancer, and presents information that is dangerously misleading to your readers.

Everyone is born with two copies of both the BRCA1 and BRCA2 genes, which play essential roles in preventing cancer. Individuals born with a change or mutation in one of these genes bear a higher lifetime risk of breast, ovarian, and other cancers than those without a mutation not because the gene is “turned on” but because they lack a working copy of one of the genes involved in preventing cancer development.

Ms. Etheridge has disclosed that she has a mutation in the BRCA2 gene. “Turning the gene on” has nothing to with the increased cancer risk. While everyone benefits from a healthy diet and other positive lifestyle choices, Ms. Etheridge’s statement about turning BRCA2 on and off with diet is inaccurate and can lead to high-risk women drawing incorrect and dangerous conclusions about their ability to prevent cancer through diet alone, and may lead some women to blame themselves for a cancer they were genetically predisposed to developing.

Equally troubling is Ms. Etheridge’s suggestion discouraging women from pursuing genetic testing. The decision to undergo genetic testing is a personal one that is best made after consulting with a health care expert known as a genetic counselor. Genetic counselors educate people about their inherited risk for cancer and help them make informed medical decisions about their genetic testing and managing their cancer risk. Peer-reviewed medical research studies have shown that there are medical interventions that extend the life of BRCA mutation carriers. Genetic counseling and testing can save the life of a high-risk woman.

FORCE (Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered) is a national nonprofit dedicated to improving the lives of individuals and family facing hereditary breast and ovarian cancer. We encourage anyone who has
tested positive for BRCA1, BRCA2, or other gene mutation associated with increased cancer risk, as well as those who are concerned they might be at risk for hereditary cancer, to consult with a medical genetics specialist. Expert-reviewed information, including how to find a genetics expert in your area, is available on the FORCE website: www.facingourrisk.org.

Sincerely,

Sue Friedman, DVM
Founder and Executive Director
FORCE: Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered

Lisa Rezende, Ph.D.
Vice President/Education
FORCE: Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered

Monica Alvarado, MS, CGC
Genetics Services Regional Administrator
Kaiser Permanente
Los Angeles, CA

Rachel F. Brem, MD
Director of Breast Imaging & Intervention
George Washington University Dept. of Radiology

Robert Burger, MD
Department of Surgical Oncology
Director, Women’s Cancer Center
Fox Chase Cancer Center

Susan Domchek, MD
Executive Director, Basser Research Center for BRCA
Director, MacDonald Women’s Cancer Risk Evaluation Center
Basser Professor in Oncology, University of Pennsylvania

Judy Garber, MD, MPH
Director, Cancer Risk and Prevention Program
Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Karen Hurley, PhD
Clinical Psychologist, Hereditary Cancer Risk
Noah Kauff, MD  
Director, Ovarian Cancer Screening and Prevention, Gynecology Service, Department of Surgery  
Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

Jennifer Klemp, PhD, MPH  
Risk Assessment Counselor and Program Manager of the Breast Cancer Survivorship Center  
University of Kansas Medical Center

Allison Kurian, MD MSc  
Assistant Professor of Medicine and of Health Research and Policy  
Divisions of Oncology and Epidemiology  
Stanford University School of Medicine

Christine Laronga, MD  
Program Leader, Comprehensive Breast Program  
H. Lee Moffitt Cancer Center and Research Institute

Ellen Matloff, MS  
President and CEO  
My Gene Counsel

Timothy Rebbeck, PhD  
Leader, Cancer Center Genetics, Epidemiology and Risk Reduction Program  
Abramson Cancer Center

BJ Rimel, MD  
Cedars-Sinai Medical Center

Leigha Senter-Jamieson  
Licensed Genetic Counselor, Associate Professor  
The Ohio State University

Victoria Seewaldt, MD  
Associate Professor of Medicine and Associate Professor of Pharmacology and Cancer Biology  
Duke Comprehensive Cancer Center

Rebecca Sutphen, MD  
Professor, Departments of Pediatrics and Oncologic Sciences  
College of Medicine  
University of South Florida

Elizabeth Swisher, MD  
Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology
Medical Director, Breast and Ovarian Cancer Prevention Program
University of Washington School of Medicine

Melinda Telli, MD
Assistant Professor of Medicine
Stanford University
Division of Medical Oncology