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Opinion

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Let's end breast cancer by 2020

By Fran Visco

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Man's first steps on the moon, which we commemorate every July 20, were both an astonishing human achievement and an affirmation of our nation's unique willingness to do great things. The seemingly impossible challenge President Kennedy issued in 1961 became breathtaking reality only 98 months later. It is time to reawaken this impulse and honor our heritage by committing to a goal no less ambitious or achievable — than the moon landing seemed half a century ago: ending breast cancer by 2020.

On one level, we have made great strides in attacking breast cancer. Pink ribbons abound. Countless thousands of women and men — walk and run to raise money for a cure. Awareness is near universal. From this perspective, it's easy to believe that breast cancer is in retreat.

But this seeming success has masked a medical failure. The United States spends well more than \$1 billion a year on breast cancer research, and we have little to show for it in terms of the outcomes that matter most. While mortality rates have been gradually declining, they are nowhere near commensurate with our investment in dollars and attention to the issue.

The numbers tell an important story. Twenty years ago, 119 American women died every day from the disease; today, it's 110. Nearly 300,000 women in this country will be diagnosed with the disease this year. About 40,000 women will die. That number is close to 500,000 globally. If this is victory, no one should want to contemplate defeat.

We have learned a great deal about the enemy during this long, drawn out war. Our understanding of the biology, pathology and genetics of breast cancer has increased

dramatically. And, our capacity to gather, synthesize and analyze data is beyond anything even conceivable 40 years ago. The problem is that we are not applying our forces intelligently.

The shortfall is not in scientific knowledge, but in organizational and systemic dysfunction that discourages bold new ideas in favor of safe research and predictable results. We have created an infrastructure intent on keeping itself going, with no real focus on the true goal. As a result, we get slightly better treatments, slightly better surgeries and slightly better radiation regimes – benefits, to be sure, but no end to the disease itself.

It is time to leverage the knowledge we've gained and allocate our resources to create a collaborative effort to achieve two overarching goals: preventing people from getting breast cancer in the first place and preventing those who get it from dying of it.

The process has already begun and is yielding some promising results. The National Breast Cancer Coalition has created the Artemis Project® — named for Apollo's sister — to implement strategic plans in these areas starting with a collaboration to develop preventive vaccines. Under NBCC leadership, some of the world's leading breast cancer researchers, as well as a cadre of multi-disciplinary experts, are working in parallel to tackle the tasks necessary to prepare vaccines for clinical trials in five years.

As breast cancer survivors and NBCC advocates, we have given up hope and taken action. We have but one agenda: to end breast cancer. No one is minimizing the difficulty of the task ahead. But it is because the goal is so big and important that nothing less than a national commitment of our energies and skills is required.

Those who think this is impossible should look to the sky. Yesterday's science fiction is today's science. We can end breast cancer if we summon the will to do so. Decades of investment have given us the tools and refined the technology. We now know much and can learn the rest in time to meet our goal. Failure cannot be an option.

Fran Visco is president of the National Breast Cancer Coalition.