

I attended the San Antonio Breast Cancer Symposium (SABCS) for the first time in 2023, at the urging of my mentor. I went in thinking that most of what I'd hear would be over my head as a new advocate for breast cancer patients and a nutritionist who is not very up to speed on oncology lingo. What I found was that I was able to understand the presentations and posters very well. I got the impression that the researchers who were presenting were in most cases, aware that there were patient advocates in the crowd who needed them to use lay language whenever possible, and as such I was able to glean a good deal of valuable information.

I'd never gone to a poster session until this event, and if the presentations were a little daunting, these poster sessions were much less so. If anything I was grieved that they were so short in the time window we had to see all the posters. I had a list of about 40 posters that I wanted to read at each session, and there was no way I could get to them all in the time allotted. I've learned that next time I should choose a dozen and hope that I get to read six! But the cool thing about poster sessions is that the actual researcher who made the poster about the research they did is standing right there and excited to talk to you about it. In many cases they are young students or internists who don't feel badly about translating their work into lay terms at all. Some of them were even a little shy, being that their work is not so often in the public arena. They were friendly and eager to talk to me about what they learned, and they always did a great job of it.

I was lucky to have my mentor right there next to me for much of the symposium, and I recommend finding a mentor to go with you if at all possible. When I was feeling overwhelmed, I'd go for a walk along the riverwalk and try to get some silent time to decompress, but it also helped to attend the nightly sessions with The Alamo Breast Cancer Foundation, who are there at the symposium just to help us advocates with not feeling "in over our heads". These reviews at the end of each day helped to normalize my role as a learner, and a lay-person in a complex medical science setting.

If you're wondering if going to the SABCS is a good use of your time as a new breast cancer advocate I'd ask yourself these things:

1. Are you interested in learning the terms, abbreviations and topics involved breast cancer research "by immersion"?
2. Are you willing to be a learner and have someone explain the parts of scientific research that you don't understand?
3. Are you interested in networking with other breast cancer advocates in the advocate lounge or passing out literature at the advocate tabling area?
4. Are you ok with being inundated with choices to digest lectures, demos, conversations and posters that you could never possibly get to all of?

When I first signed up for the SABCS, I thought this would be a one-time experience for me—I'd go and see what there was to see, and hear what there was to hear, just this once. But I now have it as my goal to go back each year and learn about the cutting edge research, as well as the lesser known or more often buried small developments that you don't always hear about in the news because it's not as flashy. I found myself more interested in the "baby step" kinds of trials and the retrospective studies that shed light on how we may be

misunderstanding patterns. There are so many ways to learn at such a big conference setting—the size of the gathering alone was beyond my imagination. I hope to see you there, in the advocate lounge this year!