

## A Must Watch Movie: “Living Proof” Movie Review

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How often do you get to watch a movie that brings to life an aspect of the cancer registrar’s work in a way that is touching, well-acted and entertaining? “Living Proof” is this kind of movie. What could have been a schmaltzy Lifetime Television disease-of-the-month movie is instead an inspirational true story of the dedication of one doctor and the lives he has touched.

This movie dramatizes the efforts that Dr. Dennis Slamon, portrayed by Harry Connick, Jr., a UCLA Medical Center oncologist and researcher, took to make HER2/neu testing and Herceptin a viable option for women who have this more aggressive breast cancer. Connick nails the doctor role with just the right amount of nerd to believe he’s a doctor and captures the determination of Dr. Slamon’s belief that he can affect the survival rates for breast cancer patients. We quickly see that Dr. Slamon is determined to prove his theory, even at the cost of lost family time, doubts in his tenacity and political maneuvering by overzealous clinical trial over-seers. The FDA and the drug company present challenges to Dr. Slamon’s ability to get this drug to the patients. When the drug company stops funding him, he is lucky that one of his friends is Lilly Tartikoff (Angie Harmon), a well-connected philanthropist and wife of Brandon Tartikoff who at that time was head of NBC. She convinces Revlon to donate initially to keep his research going, and after that she continues generating money by putting on the annual “Fire and Ice Ball”. The drug company, Genentech, did eventually jump back in with funding and they are the current producer of Herceptin.

As we get engrossed in Dr. Slamon’s struggles to get this drug approved for clinical trials, we meet a number of women who we know are going to get the dreaded doctor talk, “you have cancer”. Their stories merge with Dr. Slamon’s story as they each find their way to the clinical trials. Bringing these women to life are some big names: Bernadette Peters, Swoosie Kurtz, Trudie Styler, Regina King and Jennifer Coolidge. Each actress gives a personal touch to her character and makes the viewing audience care about each and every one. The saddest story is the young mother who is in the mouse trials but can’t continue on to the clinical trial because she doesn’t meet the protocol criteria. When her mother (Swoosie Kurtz) begs Dr. Slamon to give her daughter more Herceptin because of positive results, it is heart breaking to see him have to tell her no. Later on the compassionate care clause is added to the protocols to help these kinds of situations.

The most uplifting story involves Bernadette Peters' character, Barbara. She is fed up with chemotherapy and she is on her way to Mexico to try some last ditch nutrition therapy. Dr. Slamon originally calls her to ask her to be on the trial and she refuses. He becomes convinced that the Herceptin can help her and calls her *again* in the middle of the night before her trip. Yes, this is the kind of doctor you want on your side. He convinces her to postpone her trip so she can join the trial. She ends up having a measureable response as her metastatic neck tumor shrinks and she is eventually deemed cancer free. Other characters don't fare as well, but their stories add human faces to the breast cancer statistics. Trudie Styler plays a quirky hippie lady who is into natural remedies who isn't so lucky to move on to the next clinical trial. Jennifer Coolidge plays the humorous patient who makes the other patient's laugh. The other positive story is based on Regina King's character that inconveniently has her breast cancer diagnosis recur around the same time that she meets the man of her dreams. She breaks it off with him because she feels she is going to die and she doesn't want him to suffer. She ends up finding out about the clinical trials. After she has spent weeks trying to get through massive paper work and bad luck to get on the third clinical trial, she is told by a nurse that she is too early as the trial is starting the next week. She explains to the nurse--with the truth of those close to death--how hard it is to wait for people who aren't ready for her because she is *dying* and death waits for no one. This quote will stay with me for a long time. The nurse calls Dr. Slamon and he hooks her up as the first patient to start the third trial. We later see her getting married and we hope disease free.

The FDA approved Herceptin in 1998. This movie was released in 2008. Today, the full impact of getting Herceptin to all the women who need it is reflected in this movie's Amazon reviews from patients who are the "living proof". The patient played by Bernadette Peters is still alive and living in the Northwest. For you readers, the movie is an adaption of the book *Her-2: The Making of Herceptin, a Revolutionary Treatment for Breast Cancer* by Robert Bazell. Dr. Slamon is still working in cancer research and his immense biography is here if you want to read more about this incredible human being who never gave up. <http://www.cancer.ucla.edu/Index.aspx?page=367>

I highly recommend Living Proof.

