

Record-breaking stamp raises sticky questions

→ Marc Beishon



Concern that vital research is being side-lined for lack of funds prompted US breast cancer surgeon Ernie Bodai to campaign for a special fundraising stamp. Despite the 6-cent mark-up, it has outsold all previous commemorative stamps including one of Elvis Presley. Yet Bodai has met with harsh criticism from some surprising quarters.

What is small, sticky and worth more than \$50 million and counting? Answer: America's Breast Cancer Research Stamp, a so-called 'semi-postal' mail stamp that has not only raised millions for cancer research but has also made history by being the biggest-selling 'commemorative' postage stamp in the country's history.

Semi-postals are a simple idea – by adding an extra charge to the normal face value of a stamp, they have been used for many years in other countries to raise money for charitable causes such as the Red Cross, to help pay for various Olympic Games and to support war efforts. After administration costs the rest of the extra goes to the cause – the breast cancer stamp currently sells for 45 cents, compared with the normal 39 cents first-class value. But the breast cancer stamp is a modern phenomenon among semi-postals.

For a start, when it was approved in 1998 it was the first ever semi-postal issued by the US Post Office – by and large, semi-postals have been most popular in Europe. Second, the breast cancer stamp can lay claim to being one of the most popular semi-postals of all time worldwide, capturing Americans' hearts and minds so well that 900 million have been sold – more than a commemorative Elvis Presley stamp of the early 1990s (which was just a standard stamp). And the idea for the stamp came from one man – breast cancer surgeon Ernie Bodai, who surmounted formidable obstacles to get the stamp introduced.

Bodai, who is director of the Breast Health Center at the Kaiser Permanente Point West facility in Sacramento, California, explains how the idea came to him. "I was preparing a lecture on the history of breast cancer surgery and looked into art history – you can trace the history of treat-

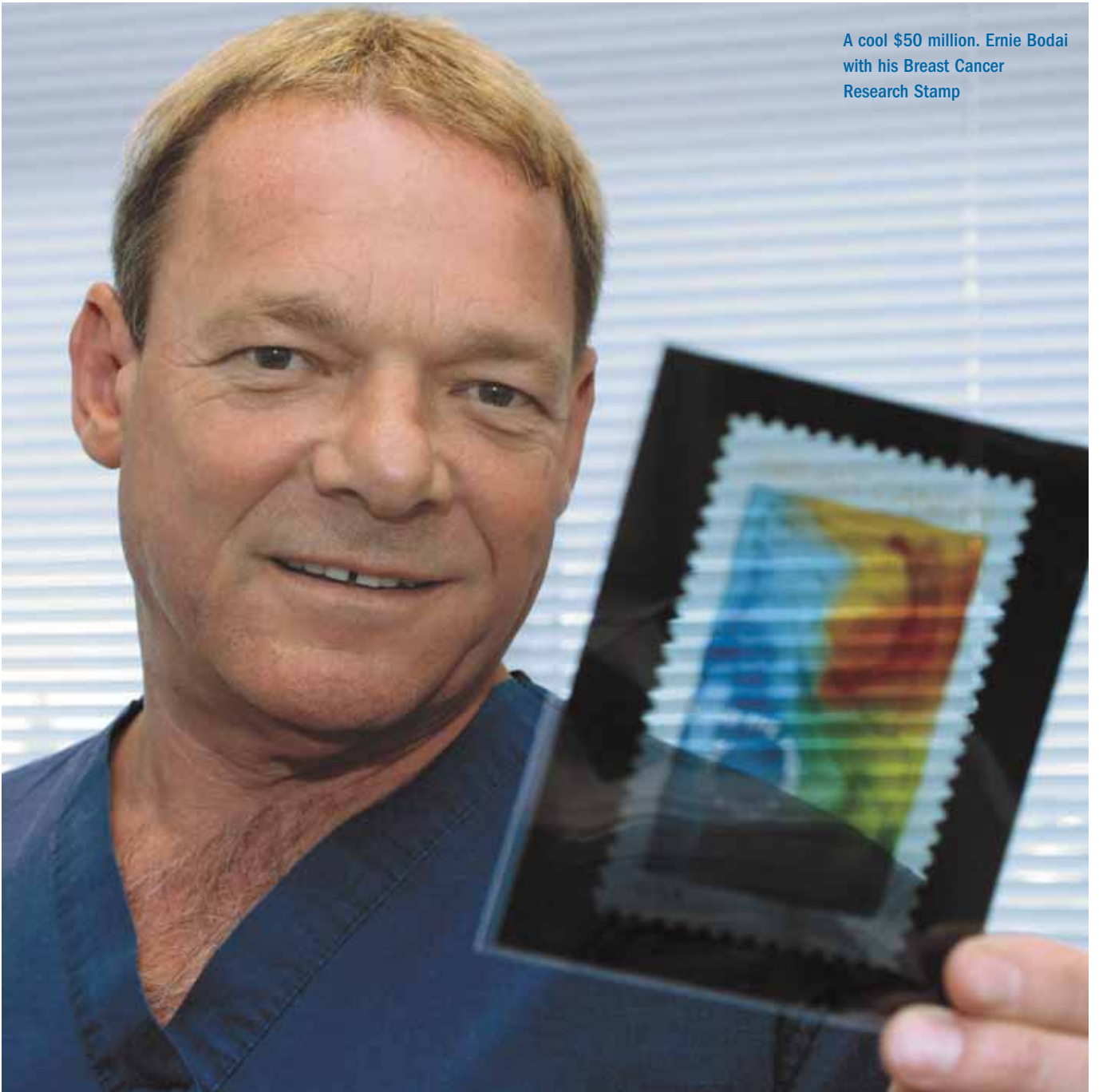
ment by looking at often gory surgery artwork going back to ancient Egyptian times. It was then I thought about a stamp for breast cancer – and a moment later, I thought we could price it higher to raise money for research."

A DROP IN CANCER RESEARCH

This was in 1996, a time, adds Bodai, when it was becoming apparent that there was a serious drop in cancer research in the US. "Clinical trials had become much more expensive thanks to a growth in paperwork and the sheer cost of the new therapies that were coming out. While in the early 1990s we were funding 70% of all proposals, today it's in the 20% range. There just is not enough money to fund studies – and what if one that gets turned down has the crucial piece of information we need?"

It is this nagging thought that has driven Bodai in his stamp quest – that and the lack of progress in breast cancer treatment, typified by the long

A cool \$50 million. Ernie Bodai with his Breast Cancer Research Stamp



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procession of women presenting at his clinic for surgery. With this aim, and realising it would take a Government Act for the US Post Office to issue its first semi-postal, he initially wrote to more than 50 women in Congress and the Senate – and received absolutely no replies.

That made Bodai “furious” and was the start of a virtually one-man campaign to lobby for the stamp. Although he received some help from certain people, in particular cancer survivor Betsy Mullen, who had formed a women’s breast cancer information group, Bodai says he was more or less on his own as he trod the corridors in Washington in a two-year campaign that was hugely costly in terms of his energy, time and expenses.

The painful details of how Bodai managed to get support for the stamp and see it through to a Government Act – the Stamp Out Breast Cancer Act – and the issue of the stamp in 1998 have been written up extensively in the US. Much of the story is about how someone with no lobbying experience goes through the steep learning curve of working out just how to get one government bill onto the books ahead of the many hundreds put forward each year. Bodai says he enlisted the help of his own profession – the cancer societies and the American College of Surgeons – to write to Congress, and he and his close lobbying colleagues made early breakthroughs in gaining the support of congressmen and women whose own lives had been affected by breast cancer.

But two issues stand out for Bodai, particularly as he is now working to help introduce semi-postals in other countries. The first is the likely attitude of a post office. “The big fear of the US Post Office, and of other post offices I have dealt with elsewhere, is that if they start a breast cancer stamp, they will have the Alzheimer’s, heart disease and lung cancer people come after them as well, and most post offices do not want to be bothered with fund raising.”

Indeed, the US Post Office has been inundated with requests for semi-postals for many other causes, and two others have since been issued – one for the victims of the 9/11 terrorist attack, the other for domestic violence. But back in 1996, the Post Office, says Bodai, was opposed to issuing its first semi-postal and even issued a non-fund-raising breast cancer awareness stamp of its own the following year, “trying to derail my stamp. It didn’t work.”

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES

The second – and still ongoing – issue has been a lack of support from the very organisations Bodai thought he could rely on, namely the large breast cancer charities. For Bodai, this is a straightforward territorial dispute. “Several influential organisations that should have supported us didn’t, because they weren’t going to be the recipients of the funds,” he says. “Most of these organisations are run by strong female personalities and they also don’t like me because I’m male.

“I put great effort into establishing relationships with them as I really needed their help with lobbying, but every time I went to Washington they thought I was stealing their thunder. I even said, ‘I’ll give you the project and never come back if you get the job done.’” The largest such charity, the National Breast Cancer Coalition (NBCC), is the one he has most in mind.

While not opposing the stamp, Fran Visco, NBCC’s president, comments: “We feel that the stamp doesn’t raise much money and abrogates the US Congress’s duty to appropriate sufficient funds for breast cancer research. It is a band-aid that makes Congress look good, others feel good, but doesn’t really do enough. We do not support the effort, in part because we only support those efforts that we believe will have a major impact on breast cancer. The stamp does not fall into this category, and, in our opinion, fails to effectively raise the public awareness of the vast resources needed to eradicate breast cancer.”

Naturally, Bodai disagrees. The stamp, he says, has played a big part in raising awareness – the many millions sold is testimony – and while the \$50 million raised for research may be a relatively small slice of breast cancer funding over the last decade, it has gone to important work. The money is channelled via two bodies: 70% to the National Institutes of Health/National Cancer Institute (NCI) and 30% to the Department of Defense’s (DoD) Medical Research Program. It has largely gone to research programmes

outside mainstream funding, such as the NCI's Insight and Exceptional Opportunities awards, and the DoD's Idea awards.

Many of the grants, says Bodai, are for amounts around the \$100,000 mark, and have gone to new scientists who have not yet established themselves, "Not to the good old boys' club who get the same money every year from the same places. And in the GAO's report there is a list of six major advances that have been funded by the stamp." (The GAO – US General Accounting Office – produces reports on the effectiveness of the fundraising stamps; approval for the breast stamp has to be renewed every two years.)

This research includes the identification of new proteins not previously known as autoantigens of breast cancer, a new molecule that inhibits the activity of epidermal growth factor, and a new tumour suppressor gene deleted in many breast and ovarian cancers, related to a gene known to be important in identifying colon cancer. Many of the research studies, adds Bodai, could be important for cancers other than breast.

A GLOBAL JOURNEY

Bodai has barely let up in his crusade since the stamp was first issued, travelling to many speaking events, setting up the Cure Breast Cancer Foundation (www.curebreastcancer.org) as an organisation behind the initiative, and helping to promote the stamp worldwide, the 'global journey', as he calls it. Olivia Newton-John's charity, the Liv Foundation, is

a partner in this global effort. A semi-postal has been issued in Hungary using the same design as the US – Bodai was born in Hungary and came to America as a child – and he says there are also plans in Romania and Slovenia. He also became a cancer sufferer himself – he was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2000 and certainly supports the introduction of a stamp for this disease, noting that its profile (in numbers affected) is similar to breast cancer in the US.

He's grateful to corporate sponsorship that has helped offset some of the many thousands of his own dollars he has spent, and companies such as Kellogg's have also featured the stamp on their packaging – promotion worth millions. But there are wider questions about the stamp and the 'business' of breast cancer charity generally, explored in a new book by Samantha King, professor of kinesiology and health studies at Queen's University, Kingston, Canada, entitled *Pink Ribbons, Inc.: Breast Cancer and the Politics of Philanthropy*.

Says King: "Breast cancer has been transformed into a market-driven industry. It has become more about making money for corporate sponsors than funding innovative ways to treat breast cancer. Fundraising for breast cancer has developed into a highly competitive market in which large foundations and corporations compete with one another to attract the loyalty of consumers – in this case, well-intentioned members of the public wanting to do their part in the fight against the disease."

HARD TO SAY 'NO'

In a chapter devoted to the breast cancer stamp, King writes that it soon became a bipartisan, politically acceptable measure that was "hard to say no to" (especially because it helped shift the onus from the state to volunteerism and consumerism). The stamp, she argues, is just more of the same in America's history of 'big spending' on cancer research and the recent rise in the 'pink ribbon'-style awareness industry, rather than "evidence of a widespread and new found concern about the disease". Breast cancer politics, she says, can instead become very partisan if issues such as health inequalities are raised. "The stamp became ... a mechanism for limiting how people think about, speak of, act upon, and constitute the disease," she concludes.

Bodai is unconcerned by such controversy, and indeed notes himself the infighting for funds and kudos among breast cancer and other 'disease' charities. He recognises that much more needs to be done to address America's health inequities in breast cancer, but is unrepentant about the basic research funded by the stamp. Given the struggle to get the funding stream running, he's not about to rock the boat in the US, but says other countries can and should channel funds toward better treatment and screening.

And before the Internet wipes out the postage stamp for good, Bodai – in a still largely one-man effort – will continue to enthuse others in the worldwide research community to post their desire for a new source of funds.

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