SHORT REPORT

Locally advanced breast cancer in a 15th century painting in Milan

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Summary
This previously unreported renaissance painting depicts a young woman with locally advanced breast cancer reaching out towards a healing potion in the church of Santa Maria della Grazia in Milan, that houses Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper. Today’s potion may well contain neoadjuvant systemic therapy including trastuzumab that may allow breast conserving surgery and targeted intraoperative radiotherapy.

During the 8th Milan Breast Cancer conference, I noticed this fresco (Fig. 1) in the church of Santa Maria della Grazia that houses Leonardo da Vinci’s “Last Supper”. It depicts a woman holding a child and she appears to have an ulcerating cancer in the upper outer quadrant of her right breast (Fig. 2). The differential diagnosis is lactational adenoma or tuberculosis. There are two more patients—one has his left leg bandaged and the other is prostrate at the bottom of the painting. All seem to be reaching towards the potion being handed out by the Gods. Even in this renaissance period, medical belief systems still relied on God for a cure.

Today, if this lady wished to conserve her breast, she would have neoadjuvant chemotherapy (including Herceptin if HER2neu positive), followed by breast conserving surgery with a possible entry into the targeted intraoperative radiotherapy boost (Targit-B) trial.1

Reference

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Figure 1 A 15th century Milan painting: Patients reach for the heavenly potion.

Figure 2 The young woman appears to suffer from a locally advanced breast cancer.

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