Early detection and treatment of breast cancer have improved women’s odds of survival. But suppose doctors and medicine promise no hope to a cancer victim?

Dr. Karon Schwartz, graduate nursing program director, says that Amish women distrust the medical field, turning to it only as a last resort. While researching beliefs and practices of Amish breast cancer treatment in 2001, she learned that “More [Amish] women died of breast cancer than their surrounding English neighbors.”

She further discovered that cultural misunderstandings with insensitive doctors and a rejection of “unnatural” modern medicine result in Amish women rarely receiving proper medical care. Instead, they turn to Amish healers, herbalists and biofeedback experts.

“They believe in the natural way versus the medical way,” says Schwartz, and use old-world home remedies such as “The Black Box” (a simple light hooked to a battery) and “cancer salves” to cure breast cancer. Many of these remedies actually endanger the woman. Cancer salves, for example, corrode skin tissue with their lye bases.

A stigma also applies to those who seek medical assistance since many Amish believe God rejects unnatural methods of healing.

“In 2001, more [Amish] women died of breast cancer than their English neighbors.”

—Dr. Karon Schwartz

Schwartz, whose husband was raised Amish, gives presentations locally and is at work on a documentary of Amish health practices for PBS. She hopes her research will increase awareness of Amish healthcare and generate sensitivity toward it. If physicians understand the Amish culture, they can better accommodate Amish needs. “If you don’t understand the culture, you can’t ask the [right] questions,” says Schwartz.

—JACI MILLER (’05)