



A SIX-POINT CALL FOR PRESIDENTIAL ACTION ON CANCER

The Sail Through Cancer Foundation is calling on President Obama to dramatically improve the nation's approach to cancer, including prevention, screening, treatment and post-treatment care. It is time to revitalize the war on cancer and to introduce new, ground-breaking presidential initiatives to win this war. We are calling on the President to include our six points at the top of his cancer agenda.

1. Appoint a cancer czar.

We are asking that a highly qualified individual be appointed to spearhead the effort. A cancer czar would implement an initiative to form a high-level task force of the finest minds in the nation to assist in the planning and execution of a no-holds-barred assault on the overwhelming challenges of sufferers facing the uphill battles of treatment and its aftermath – piecing together the fragments of their lives, relationships and spirits after treatment.

2. Create an Internet-based cancer management system.

A plan for an intuitive Internet-based system must be developed to provide individuals and medical professionals with information and connections to resources. The system should be able to match each patient with all of the resources they need, specifically diagnostic services, treatment, clinical trials, financial aid and resources, emotional support and after-care. The system must be securely encrypted to ensure patient privacy and confidentiality. Legislation may be required to address privacy issues. The system must include a support desk manned by social workers certified to help patients with the management of their treatment and assist in identifying all available resources. This Internet database will be a tool for doctors and patients to navigate the cancer journey. The system must provide a platform for medical practitioners, researchers and the applicable government agencies to post the latest data regarding new treatment options, mitigation of side effects, clinical trials and research.

3. Place a higher priority on primary prevention, public awareness and education outreach programs.

The public must be better educated on how to help prevent cancer and what to do if they develop known warning signs or symptoms that deserve to be medically evaluated. Just as no one is turned away at a hospital emergency department if unable to pay for treatment, no one should be turned away from getting necessary cancer screenings, or in the event of a diagnosis of cancer, all treatment that is needed and appropriate. As highlighted by the Cancer Prevention Coalition on November 26, 2008, the President's plan must place more emphasis on prevention. Effective prevention is the most important step in reducing the impacts of cancer and reducing overall medical costs, a previously-stated priority. As a nation, we need to raise awareness of risks of natural carcinogens and implement coordinated action to support prevention initiatives.

Specifically, our proposed cancer management system should include up-to-date information on known carcinogens. There is too much confusion among the general public as to what is and is not a carcinogen and the personal impact of exposure. The system also must include compilations of data regarding risk factors, both those present in our environment and those resulting from lifestyle choices, such as smoking and the less obvious and less generally understood or accepted behaviors that lead to cancer.

4. Develop specific standards for cancer prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment and after-care needs.

A set of national standards covering all aspects of cancer, from prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment and after-care should be established. The task force, under the direction of the cancer czar, must make the development of a cohesive set of standards one of its highest priorities.

Screening. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that other than PAP smears, existing tests available for early detection of breast, colorectal and prostate cancer are not reducing the incidence of mortality rates of these types of cancers to the extent previously thought. The American Cancer Society states on their website, as an example, that "...while studies are under way to try to determine if early detection tests for prostate cancer in large groups of men will lower the prostate cancer death rate, early results from two large studies haven't offered clear answers." More needs to be done and standards developed so that screening, as in this example, is both effective and doesn't result in over-treating those with cancers that might not require aggressive treatment.

More organized delivery of screening methods across demographic boundaries, coupled with better communications between health care providers treating illnesses that have been linked to cancer, such as diabetes and heart disease, will facilitate analysis and assist in the creation of responsive programs.

Treatment. Cancer patients are confronted by a myriad of treatment options, compounded by the fact that treatment varies from one facility to another. National standards must be implemented. The development of guidelines for screening potential after-effects of treatment and identification and dissemination of mitigation methods needs to be done as new treatment methods are developed and implemented. Cancer treatment should become less tumor-centric and more patient-centered.

After-effects. There are over 10 million cancer survivors in the United States and a study conducted in mid-2008, prior to the current recession, indicated a full one-third of those survivors were unemployed and unemployable, without medical insurance and many, in despair. The needs of this growing group must be addressed.

5. Create new initiatives to promote the sharing and dissemination of the latest research and speed its translation from research to treatment.

Finding "a cure for cancer in our time," as the President has advocated, is the primary objective of any plan to deal with cancer. Sustained federal research funding will do much to develop new treatment options. However, the cancer czar must implement a comprehensive written plan to be prepared by the best minds in the field. Goals, timelines and accountability must be included. Public support for the plan should be enlisted so that continued implementation and funding will be guaranteed through changing administrations.

Research endeavors must be coupled with the means to promote early sharing of research data. Equally important, methods have to be found to speed the translation from research to treatment, including the timely gathering and dissemination of data on new or experimental treatments. The Internet-based cancer management system could serve as a central repository of this information, ensuring availability to all interested parties.

6. Create and implement a cancer patient bill of rights.

Evidence suggests that many individuals who exhibit early warning signs of cancer don't submit themselves for screening. Hard numbers are not easy to come by, but there is a growing body of anecdotal evidence that fear, lack of insurance, denial and other factors are at play. Failure to receive screening and diagnostic services when early-warning signs are evident can result in terrible suffering and, for far too many, in death. This vital issue must be addressed and better understood and quantified. A cancer patient bill of rights must be established. No one should needlessly die of cancer. Cancer screening, diagnosis, treatment and after-care should be universally available. Laws need to be enacted to enable receipt of cancer screening, diagnosis and life-saving treatment if a person has no insurance or funds with which to pay. Perhaps out-of-the-box thinking will be required to help uninsured individuals enter the system. Such things as direct tax credits for doctors providing screening tests for uninsured individuals should be considered.

At the heart of the cancer bill of rights is the notion that the budget be crafted to adequately address all the needs of an aggressive war on all aspects of cancer and then be fully funded. The cancer czar must be dedicated to advocating for the full funding of the battle against cancer and be knowledgeable of the inner workings of the agencies now tasked with administering the federal cancer initiatives to cross inter-agency lines and coordinate the highest and best application of the available funds.

We call on President Obama to revitalize the efforts of the federal government to achieve these ends.

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