

Vote Yellow?

Both presidential candidates have been touched by cancer. John McCain has had a number of melanomas, and Barack Obama's mother died of ovarian cancer. Do you ever wonder how their personal experiences affect their healthcare policy proposals? With such personal experiences, do they rank cancer higher than other diseases in their ideas of how health care needs to change?

This past July, the Lance Armstrong Foundation (n.d.) held a summit in Columbus, OH, for 1,000 cancer activists who want to make cancer a national priority. The "Vote Yellow" campaign is asking everyone to wear a yellow wristband until the election to show that cancer is a top priority and to let elected officials know of that priority. The campaign also wants the next U.S. president to wear one when being sworn into office to help convey that message. Summit attendees were encouraged to find out where the candidates stand on cancer research funding and to spread the word. I realized that I didn't know, so I tried to find out.

I compared the candidates' healthcare proposals side by side (see www.health08.org). Although neither plan specifically addressed cancer, both candidates did make promises on the Stand Up to Cancer fund-raiser on September 5th. That ground-breaking event was an hour-long, commercial-free event, which aired simultaneously on NBC, CBS,

and ABC (see <http://su2c.standup2cancer.org>). Both presidential candidates talk about changes in health care, a reinvestment in biomedical research, and improving cancer care, but we will need to influence what happens before and after the election (after all, the devil is in the details). We need to do that wherever an opportunity exists—locally, regionally, or nationally.

We know from our own experiences that our most disadvantaged members of society take the biggest hit when it comes to health care. According to Ward et al. (2008), the disadvantaged also have poorer outcomes when uninsured or underinsured. Addressing access to health care will tackle one of the major barriers to cancer care.

We have tried addressing access issues since the 1930s and still do not provide health care as a basic right to U.S. citizens. And today 47 million are uninsured and 25 million are underinsured in the United States (Schoen, Collins, Kriss, & Doty, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). We are the only developed country in the world that does not provide health care as a basic right, yet we spend the most money on it. This is a national disgrace. Will our votes finally make a difference this year? Will our advocacy?

As a former president of the Oncology Nursing Society (ONS), I remember writing my own position statements for members to read before voting. I am not sure how many read them and whether those statements influenced voting. But they are really all ONS members have to go on. Likewise, we need to be informed about any candidate we vote



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for. So take the time to dig a little deeper on this and other issues that are important to you. Do it for this election. And do it for the next ONS election, too.

There has been a lot of buzz about the upcoming presidential elections, which is a good thing. It will be even better if that buzz turns into action and people get out and vote. Will you? And will you be wearing yellow?

References

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Excerpts From an Interview With the Presidential Candidates

Lance Armstrong: We will lose more than 560,000 Americans to cancer this year, 1,500 a day; that amounts to one American death every minute. What are three specific things you will do to help accelerate the fight against this disease?

John McCain: As president, I will lead the effort for stronger and more coordinated public and private research efforts. I've worked in the past to double NIH funding and will also work for greater focus on healthy living, early detection, and ensuring access to quality and affordable care for all Americans, especially those who are denied coverage because of a devastating disease like cancer. This is a fight we must and will win as a nation.

Barack Obama: First, I will double cancer research funding. Second, I will provide affordable health care for all Americans. As someone who watched my mother argue with insurance companies while she laid in bed dying of cancer, I'll make certain those companies stop discriminating against those who are sick. I'll push them to cover cancer screenings and provide treatment and preventative care. Third, we'll modernize the healthcare system to reduce medical error, lower costs, and improve the quality of patient care. It's time for a government that wages a war against cancer as aggressive as the war cancer wages against us. As president, I will lead that fight.

—Stand Up to Cancer, September 5, 2008

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