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 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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