



Putting cancer on global agenda

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Are you ready for cancer? Twelve million people worldwide will be diagnosed with cancer this year.

Many have heard that tragic figure enough to become somewhat immune. What's new is that, for the first time, cancer holds the horrifying distinction of being the leading cause of death around the globe.

Today is World Cancer Day, a chance for us to take stock of the progress we've made against this disease since President Richard M. Nixon declared war on it 40 years ago. The sad truth is that in 2010, cancer took eight million of us. And for 28 million people worldwide, fighting this disease is part of daily life. Those numbers are predicted to double by 2020, triple by 2030.

The war on cancer has been fought without a unifying strategy or clear path to victory. Despite the hard work and dedication of patient advocates, policymakers, elected officials, scientists and health professionals, we still have a long way to go. Here's the evidence:

Cancer has the most devastating economic impact of any cause of death, according to a study by LIVESTRONG and the American Cancer Society. In the U.S. alone, cancer costs 1.73 percent of gross domestic product. The global economy takes a nearly trillion-dollar hit every year in losses from premature death and disability due to cancer.

This analysis does not include direct medical costs — which could double that figure.

Here's something that should give the wealthy nations a wake-up call. Seventy percent of all cancer deaths occur in developing nations, but these countries receive only 5 percent of what we spend to fight cancer. When a family loses a bread-winner to cancer in the developing world, it can mean no more school for the children, less food on the table and an indelible stigma to its members.

What brought us to this point? Maybe it was the idea that cancer is too vast to fight; that in nations where health systems are scarce, there's no hope for saving people, even from cancers that are curable. Nothing could be more short-sighted — or more cruel.

Where do we go from here? First, we need to throw out the old ways of thinking about and fighting cancer. We can no longer take a piece-meal approach to global health and hope for the best. We must examine what has proven effective and form comprehensive strategies that build on past successes.

The progress made by the communicable disease community in combating HIV and AIDS offers an important lesson — one of hope. Public-private partnerships, new ways of thinking about financing and procurement and other innovations have literally saved millions of lives. Strengthening health systems — and equipping medical workers to treat people, rather than diseases — is the most effective path toward progress in combating all the prevalent threats to our health.

This September, we have an opportunity to put diseases like cancer on the global health agenda at the U.N. General Assembly's Summit on Non-Communicable Diseases.

This meeting has the potential to secure commitment from government leaders for a coordinated global response, substantially increase resources and save millions from premature death and debilitating health complications.

We call on international leaders to strengthen health systems, especially in developing countries. We call on the United States to lead a civil society movement – one that will unite our citizens by tackling this epidemic at home, while helping our neighbors in the developing world.

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