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Ulman: New Congress Must Not Forget About Cancer

By Doug Ulman
Special to Roll Call
11:15 a.m.

Before this year is over, more than 1.5 million Americans, including nearly 67,000 D.C., Maryland and Virginia residents, will receive a cancer diagnosis. Sadly, I don't think any of us heard this statistic once during election season. In fact, we rarely heard the word "cancer" even mentioned.

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Perhaps we've become a victim of our own success. Forty years after the war on cancer was declared, too many — politicians included — assume we've got things under control.

Certainly we've had successes. Thanks to intensive private and public awareness campaigns over the last few decades, some will discover their cancer before it spreads too far. Manassas, Va., resident Rana Kahl was one of those lucky people. Rana discovered a lump in her breast on a company trip to Mexico in 2000.

After returning home she went to see her doctor, who suspected the lump was only a swollen lymph node. Just in case, he referred her to a surgeon. The surgeon also thought the lump was nothing — but again, just in case, a biopsy was performed. The results came back the next day, Rana's 33rd birthday. They had found the cancer so early that while there were no physical signs in the breast tissue, there was a small malignancy. Rana was treated with chemotherapy and radiation and has been in remission ever since. Despite warnings that chemo might leave her infertile, Rana now has two children.

Forty years ago, even 20 years ago, Rana may have been turned away by her doctor, as Susan Komen was.

She wasn't, and that's a major victory in itself, but there are still too many Americans who, because of lack of awareness, access or adequate screening, will get their diagnosis too late.

As our leaders return to a radically different Washington, D.C., they must renew their commitment to the fight against cancer, not only to curing it, but to caring for those who are enduring it and who've survived it. LIVESTRONG has outlined four strategies that we believe, taken together, can eliminate suffering and death due to cancer.

The first is increased awareness, prevention and early detection. We urge Congress to consider a new national initiative to ensure that people are aware of and have access to early detection tools.

Second, we must make sure people with cancer have quality care, which means access to treatment that has proved to be successful and is appropriate. Rolling back health care reform will likely be issue No. 1 in January, at least in the House of Representatives. Whether Republican or Democrat, our leaders must keep the end goal in mind: improving Americans' access to care and treatment.

Third, we need a broad, national cancer plan that aligns research priorities with those for cancer prevention, early detection, treatment and survivorship. Too much knowledge sits on a shelf and is never translated from the laboratory to the clinic, wasting our investments in these new discoveries.

Finally, we must work to improve the lives of the people living with cancer and those who've survived it. Today there are 12 million Americans living with cancer. Relatively few have access to programs to help restart their lives after a cancer fight, even though the effects of the disease can linger a lifetime. LIVESTRONG and our many colleagues throughout the cancer advocacy network are working tirelessly to improve the lives of people like Rana Kahl who have survived cancer but are still living with it.

As a new crop of leaders comes to Washington to develop plans for jobs and the economy, we urge them to make fighting this economically devastating disease one of their top priorities.

Doug Ulman is CEO of LIVESTRONG, a cancer advocacy group.

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