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In the Fight Against Cancer, What's Next?

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On October 2, 1996, 15 years ago today, I left my house in Austin, Texas to seek medical care for symptoms that I was sure were due to a persistent flu virus, or the routine physical consequences of life as a professional cyclist at the end of a long and grueling season.

It was 15 years ago, but it might as well have been yesterday. The reminders of the day I was diagnosed with advanced, metastatic testicular cancer are ever-present -- from the two post-surgical indentions hiding just beneath the hair on my head, which grew back after four rounds of chemotherapy, to the giggles of my five, growing children, who were not yet born, but sincerely wished for in the desperate and frightening days that followed my diagnosis.

Then there is the yellow LIVESTRONG wristband I wear, which reminds me that there are 28 million cancer survivors around the world just like me -- with their own scars, hopes, fears and reminders.

It is for them that my colleagues and I at LIVESTRONG have identified today as LIVESTRONG Day -- a day to wear yellow, show our support for people with cancer, remember the loved ones we have lost, celebrate our gains in the fight against cancer and focus our energy on what's next.

It is a particularly meaningful time to appraise our advances against cancer. Forty years ago, the year I was born, President Richard Nixon delivered a State of the Union address in which he asked for \$100 million to launch an intensive campaign to find a cure for cancer.

Progress since then has been exhilarating, but also exasperating. Cancer death rates have thankfully continued to decline steadily since the early 1990s. However, despite extraordinary advances in cancer prevention and treatment, 1,500 Americans will die from cancer today and tomorrow and the day after that. Many of them want to fight like hell and live forever. Not enough of them get to.

So, in honor of those lives, we must look forward with hope, renew our energy and unapologetically recommit ourselves to what can be done today.

First, we must defend federal research funds. Basic science, the pace of discovery and progress against cancer depend heavily on federal money and congressional leadership. Though we are facing tough economic times, the federal response to cancer and research investment must be robust and proportional to this pervasive threat to our health and well-being. We cannot settle for reduced research budgets.

Second, we have to make every possible effort to prevent cancer when we can. Experts believe that half of all cancers are avoidable. Tobacco, for example, is a leading and wholly unnecessary cause of cancer death. Thus, it is flatly irresponsible to expose non-smokers to a known danger that drives cancer incidence. We must pressure local and state governments to pass comprehensive smoke-free workplace laws immediately.

Third, we have to make information, screening and basic care available to everyone - no exceptions. Prevention education, screening and early detection are proven life-savers and essential, but often beyond the reach of all who need them. The National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program, for example, is a very effective federal program that provides breast and cervical screening for uninsured and poor women. But it is currently reaching only one in five eligible women because of inadequate funding. We are missing a critical opportunity to save and extend lives if screening is limited to only those for whom testing is accessible and affordable.

Fourth, we must advocate for and assist people coping with cancer right now. We are doing our part through the LIVESTRONG Cancer Navigation Center, which provides free, confidential services in English and Spanish by phone, online and in person in Austin, Texas. The Center provides one-on-one support to deal with insurance problems, fertility questions, treatment concerns and the emotional impact of cancer. It is one of only two navigation centers in the United States, but we hope it serves as a model for what's possible across the U.S.

Next, we have to use our voices to drown out stigma. In countries around the world and even in the U.S., stigma silences and marginalizes people living with cancer. The voices of those affected by cancer must be heard in order to facilitate community awareness and support for patients and survivors. LIVESTRONG is working to diminish stigma in places like Mexico, for example, where the expanded campaign -- Comparte Tu Historia or "Share Your Story" -- broadly and visibly promotes the real stories of 12 courageous cancer survivors from across that country.

Finally, we need to acknowledge and respond to the growing cancer challenge beyond our borders. The need for basic prevention and treatment services is acute in many developing countries, where cancer is a growing problem for communities and economies. The United Nations convened world leaders just weeks ago to discuss the global epidemic of chronic diseases like cancer, and the extent to which a stable, healthy and prosperous world depends on our ability to deliver safe, practical, affordable and effective care to everyone, everywhere.

Fifteen years ago, soon after I began treatment and long before I knew if I would survive, I received an email from a cancer patient that said, "You don't know it yet, but we're the lucky ones." I didn't understand it immediately, but I do now. For me, there was life after cancer - and five kids and seven Tour de France victories. There is also a strong and undeniable sense of purpose. I am lucky because I am still here and I can do something about it.

You can, too. Join me and the 28 million today. Share your story. Fight like hell. Wear yellow. LIVESTRONG.

Lance Armstrong is a cancer survivor, champion cyclist and founder and chairman of LIVESTRONG, an organization that serves people affected by cancer and empowers communities to take action against the world's leading cause of death. For anyone who wants to pledge to wear yellow on Sun., Oct. 2, go to LIVESTRONG.org/LIVESTRONGDay.