



Cancer From 30,000 Feet

Are We There Yet?

By Matthew Zachary

Life is about choice. Remission is not a cure. Survivorship is all the rage.

Why we fight...

Seeing as how I'm writing this on an airplane, the title may not actually be as clever as it seems. However, with a little foresight, I am hoping that by the time I finish this piece, it will be euphemistic and metaphorical.

I have chosen a life whereby not a single moment passes that I do not think, eat, sleep and breathe cancer advocacy, which, by my own personal definition, means "ensuring that the next 'you' doesn't have to go through the same crap that I did" as a 13-year survivor pediatric brain cancer. I suppose you can take cancer out of that equation entirely in such that my aphorism would be universally applicable to nearly anything, I suppose; civil rights, gay rights, poverty, education...

But let's say for a moment that we could peer down 30,000 feet to our society as a whole; and I'm not just talking about Americans. All humans. Are we a decent people? By and large, do we not all just want to live productive lives and contribute to the common good? Idealistic as it may sound, it's unfortunate that a small percentage of bad apples continue to ruin it for the rest of us. Thus we have the hyperbole of human nature and perhaps the reason why change happens so slowly and only from within.

Cancer is only about 100 years old in terms of a recognized disease that the nation felt worthy of focusing resources on. The American Cancer Society was originally founded in 1913 by 15 businessmen and physicians in NYC under the name *The American Society For The Control Of Cancer*. Then came The National Cancer Institute established in 1937 as part of the New Deal's National Cancer Institute Act.

In 1949, today's Leukemia & Lymphoma Society was founded in NYC as the Robert Roesler de Villiers Foundation. Nearly 35 years later, the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Research Foundation was formed in 1982 and, more recently, The Lance Armstrong Foundation took its place as a game-changing institution. Considering LAF was founded in 1997, it would seem that, from 30,000 feet, it is taking less and less time to gain effectiveness with the right strategic plan and vision.



And let's not forget that the "War on Cancer" – a campaign term I have grown to intensely dislike and disavow – is a mere 35 years old. (I'm 35 years old). And now we have the "War On Cancer II: The Cancer Strikes Back". So, as far as all these 'big gun initiatives' are concerned, we've had a whole lot of smart people working on this cancer thing for quite some time. For over 100 years. That's a lot of time, talent and treasure.

But what is 100 years in the scheme of things?

After all, from the perspective of an evolutionary biologist, cancer has been around for millions, perhaps billions of years. It is, after all, a naturally occurring physiological process. By simple definition alone, cancer is simply, "any malignant growth or tumor caused by abnormal and uncontrolled cell division."

The rub is, our homo sapien immune systems used to be able to deal with cancer cells much like it deals with cuts, bruises, broken bones and the sniffles. You get hurt. You get better. But for some reason, in spite of medical advances, the wildfire increase of cancer incidence during the 20th century—that ironically coincides with modern industrialization, agribusiness, technology-induced creature comforts and the McRib— has shown that our immune systems aren't doing such a good job anymore.

Our bodies can't inherently fight the cancer cells the way we used to before. Perhaps our immune systems aren't doing so well anymore because we are, in fact, living longer than we are genetically predisposed to. Or, perhaps that we have to fortify our bread, juice and milk with vitamins they should normally contain but don't because of our nutrition-deprived soil?

So what do we do to fight cancer in 2009? What elixir do we offer to bolster our immune systems? We poison ourselves—to the point of near death in many cases such as my own—with the hope of killing the cancer cells (which ironically lack immune systems of their own) along with everything else inside us that technically grows back (stomach lining, hair, sperm, dignity). The goal? Cure.

We want to be cured. We want to know that we are cancer free and that, God willing, we won't have to deal with this again in our lifetime. Sounds marvelous. But from 30,000 feet, remission from cancer doesn't sound like a cure. Cures last forever, don't they? Like the measles vaccine. One shot. No measles. Forever. Isn't that why it's called a "**cure**"?

After all, you can always get cancer again, right? (As I wrote that sentence I realize I'm preaching to the choir since this is being published by MSKCC) Many survivors are actually hyper-predisposed to relapse and secondary recurrence *because* of their initial treatment. Now *that's* the gift that keeps on giving! But that ain't 'cure' for me.



That's '*cure... for now.*'

And '*cure... for now*' is scary. It's not hopeful. It's not optimistic. It's the Boogeyman reality check that few want to acknowledge. But we want to sell hope, not reality. We want to sell 'cure' to the masses. It's sexy. It's positive. It's delusional. But it works.

And it raises billions every year.

And it's attached to a broken healthcare and insurance system governed by profit instead of ethics that is consciously disenfranchising millions of Americans in the fight of their lives every single day.

And this is not OK.

So while the majority of society still continues to blissfully believe not just that cancer is contagious but that it is one single disease (like the measles), it's no wonder we keep pushing 'cure' – because the truth is scary: that there is no cure to cancer in the sense of a magic bullet, fairy dust gelatin capsule just like there has been and will continue to be no cure to diabetes, HIV or any similar chronic condition. Bottom line: so long as you can get it again, it ain't a cure. Remission is not an excuse for a cure.

So, again, from 30,000 feet, what's the deal?

The current mission of today's National Cancer Institute is to "eliminate death and suffering" with regard to cancer. I can live with that.

1. *Get cancer.*
2. *Try not to die.*
3. *Focus on quality of life, not quantity.*

From a death sentence to a life sentence, so cancer now becomes a chronic condition.

They've even gone so far as to explore the elimination of the word "prevention". After all, how can you actually prevent cancer when infants are born with brain cancer and leukemia? How can you prevent cancer when chain smokers live to 100 and athletes in peak physical condition like John Lester, Lance Armstrong and Eric Shanteau and get struck in the prime of their lives for no apparent reason?

Who is doing this math, people?



So to keep up with a time of smarter consumers, we're now seeing a semantic public health shift from "prevention" to "risk reduction".

Reduce your risk of getting cancer! Yee Hah!

And voila! A new fear is born.

You can't prevent it, people! The Boogeyman is coming for you because risk reduction is a game of chance. It's the ultimate poker match.

Outside of the obvious – don't smoke, eat right, exercise – how is that any different than reducing your risk for anything outside of pregnancy, gambling and car accidents?

And there is fault with this logic too. We can only reduce the risk of factors we actually have control over. We have no control of various sources of key influence that we already know significantly contribute to our overall well being.

We don't have control over the water supply. (Move to Montana, perhaps?) We can only do so much to trust our low-mercury fish actually has low mercury. (Organic vegan lifestyle, anyone?) The very air we breathe is laced with all sorts of fabulous multisyllabic chemicals. (Montana, again?)

From 30,000 feet, instead of treating symptoms and racing for the 'cure', shouldn't we be racing for the 'cause'? In lieu of continuing to put band-aids on a leaky faucet, shouldn't we try to understand what caused the faucet to leak in the first place? Shouldn't risk reduction be a shared responsibility between individuals and business? **What good is juicing kale if you live in Los Angeles and breathe that delicious brown smog for breakfast?**

I am a cancer advocate. I am trying to make the next "me" not have to go through the same agony I went through as a 21-year-old college student diagnosed with brain cancer in the prime of his life. The next generation of cancer survivors deserve better than what we've been handed – more cancer incidence and a broken healthcare system compounded by a profit based dystopian medical insurance oligarchy.

Solutions to problems always begin with dialogue. Mine started 13 years ago and counting. I am still here. You are still here. This is why we fight. Forget the cure. Survivorship is all that matters. Stupid cancer.