The St. Jude's Controversy: A Welcome Spotlight on the Financial Reality of Cancer

A single mom driving all night with her sick child because she can't afford a hotel room? That's what cancer means in the United States.

November 26, 2021 By Carla Tardif

The St. Jude article published by ProPublica, entitled "St. Jude Hoards Billions While Many of Its Families Drain Their Savings," has set off a firestorm of anger.

The reaction made me very happy. It means that people felt something when they read it and the reaction was strong. That's a start.

How could you not be upset when you read about a dad sleeping in his car in the hospital parking lot while his 5-year-old daughter battles cancer inside? Or a single mother who's told to push through the eight-hour drive with her sick child because the cost of a hotel room wasn't an option?

Some are angry because they feel that St. Jude should do something about it. Others feel that it isn't St. Jude's place to take on the financial crisis families experience when their child has cancer.

I'm not here to argue which one is right.

I'm here to say there's a blurred line between medical care and human care because they have a direct impact on each other.

Fear, hunger, homelessness, job loss, isolation, bankruptcy, debilitating stress, anxiety and death—it's clear what cancer does to families. This isn't a new problem, and it's not unique to St. Jude. It's cancer.

I'm angry too. Angry that in the wealthiest country in the world, we have the poorest health outcomes because of financial barriers. Cancer robs families of a steady income because of missed work and adds out-of-pocket expenses to access treatment before medical costs even enter the picture. We have come so far in cancer research and treatments, but science is still far outpacing the patient journey. Narrowing that gap will save lives.

If this is the first time you've heard about the financial reality of cancer, I hope you won't turn away. I know it's hard to wrap your head around and heartbreaking to witness—but if families have to be brave enough to speak up when they're in it, we have to be willing to dive in to help when we're not.

So let's step away from the finger-pointing and angry rants and instead turn our attention to solving the problem.

We need a world where families never have to choose between their health and their home. Until that day, there will be more GoFundMe campaigns for medical expenses and debt, and emotional social media posts about lives changed in an instant because of cancer, reminding people it could happen to them too.

The firestorm that has ensued since the article broke makes me happy because the first step in fixing an issue of this magnitude is people knowing it exists. St. Jude is a household name and they just let everyone know a financial crisis often follows a health crisis.

I see a future where families can truly focus on healing. It's already happening in areas where Family Reach, a national nonprofit that offers wrap-around financial services for cancer patients, is entrenched in the healthcare system.

Anger is a call to action. It's the passion that wells up inside you and lets you know this is really important. It propels you into action because you can't unsee it. A cancer diagnosis shouldn't mean financial ruin on top of fearing for your own or a loved one's life.

So be angry, and let's do something about it.

Carla Tardif is CEO of Family Reach.

Carla Tardif, CEO, Family ReachCourtesy of Family Reach

To get more tips on managing financial burdens from a cancer diagnosis, see “Cancer, Hands Off My Bank Account!”

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