A Serious Undertaking to End Colorectal Cancer

Facebook's platform is playing an important role that its founders likely never expected: It's helping to connect people across the nation who have never met but are all deeply affected by colorectal cancer.

More than 9,300 patients and caregivers have come together in a private Facebook group called Blue Hope Nation, created for them by the Colorectal Cancer Alliance (CCA), formerly named the Colon Cancer Alliance. Blue Hope Nation is a safe space where its members can share their personal experiences and ask others for advice.

"You have people talking about the fact that because they've been diagnosed, their spouse left them," says Patrice Brown, senior director of program development at CCA. "Their spouse wasn't able to deal with all that comes with this diagnosis. But you also have people that are in there talking about their successes, and they went back to the doctor and they're now NED, which is no evidence of disease."

By utilizing social media, community members can receive responses in real time instead of waiting until a support-group meeting or, worse, tackling their issues alone.

PHOTO BY REEN NEMETH

◆ **Kim Newcomer, CCA manager of Never Too Young, speaking at the 2017 Colorectal Cancer Alliance National Conference in Cleveland, Ohio.**

Colorectal cancer remains a leading cause of cancer-related deaths for American men and women. Even though the survival rate has been increasing since the mid-1980s, there's still more progress to be made. The American Cancer Society estimates that by the end of this year there will have been 95,520 new diagnoses of colon cancer; 39,910 new cases of rectal cancer; and 50,260 deaths caused by these cancers.

One key component to reducing those numbers is a continued increase in the national screening rate, which rose from 34 percent in 2000 to 63 percent in 2015, according to the National Health Interview Survey conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics. CCA, in conjunction with other national organizations, is aiming for an 80 percent screening rate as the next milestone goal.

"Since this is a preventable disease, the fact that people aren't getting screened at the rates that they should is really disheartening," Brown says. "We know that there will be a number of people that will get colon cancer, and it could've been prevented had they been screened earlier."

Screenings can range from a blood test to a colonoscopy and allow doctors to discover polyps, small growths or chemical indicators, depending on which method is used.

To expand awareness and improve education around colorectal cancer and the benefits of screenings, CCA is embarking on a new initiative that starts with the citizens of Philadelphia.

"Right now, their screening rate is hovering around 44 percent, where the national average is between 60 to 65 percent," Brown says. "With such a stark difference there, we want to see how we can make a difference with raising their screening rates."

PHOTO COURTESY OF COLORECTAL CANCER ALLIANCE

◆ **Nation of Allies at the 2017 Colorectal Cancer Alliance National Conference in Cleveland, Ohio.**

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Their approach will include a component to assist the uninsured population in getting tested; navigate patients through the screening process; and educate the public, including healthcare providers, about the various screening modalities. These methods will be joined by a compelling marketing campaign to spread awareness to the general public about cancer symptoms, screenings and other related issues.

PHOTO BY STEVE TRAVARCA

◆ **CCA CEO Michael Sapienza and Sage Bolte, PhD, executive director of Life with Cancer, speaking at the 2017 Colorectal Cancer Alliance National Conference in Cleveland, Ohio.**

"It's a pretty ambitious project," Brown admits. "Our goal is that, once we launch in Philadelphia, taking what we learn there and applying it to other cities across the country."

CCA also heavily invests in life-saving research. This year, the organization launched its first peer-reviewed research grants program. In December, a grant recipient will be selected and receive $125,000 to assist in researching young-onset colorectal cancer. In 2018 and the years that follow, CCA plans to invest more than $10 million in research.

"We'll also be looking at precision medicine and pre-disease as other focus areas," Brown says. "We really want to tackle: Why is this happening, and how can we address it? Then on the precision medicine piece: How can we have more targeted therapies to really address this disease once it's been uncovered?"

The discoveries and advancements made through this critical research will move CCA one step closer to its ultimate goal of putting an end to colorectal cancer.

"So many of our patients, so many of our community members, are just looking for hope in this incredible time of need," Brown says. "We're happy to be able to provide that to them."

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