That’s a Lot of Cancer

September is the awareness period of a whopping total of seven cancers. Seven!

September 17, 2019 By Jeff Neurman

In a post from a few days back, I bemoaned — which is one of the most apt verbs when describing myself — the arrival of September. Amid my complaints about sticky desk chairs and “new” math, I also touched upon my mixed emotions regarding the month’s role as the official 1/12th of the calendar dedicated to leukemia and the awareness thereof. As many of you know, however, September — despite it being one of the shorter months — has no shortage of cancer awareness on its schedule.

For starters, I should make clear that September is not limited to merely the awareness (celebration?) of leukemia. Rather, leukemia is required to share the ninth month’s festivities with its rival blood cancer, lymphoma. Now, as many of my readers undoubtedly are aware, I am not the best of sharers, a trait I attribute to being the younger child growing up. Thus, while I think leukemia is a superior cancer — one that certainly merits its own month — lymphoma is honing in on the action. Nonetheless, I am — perhaps surprisingly — okay with this co-habitation on the calendar. My reason is simple: Although I do have a type of leukemia, I have been told that it acts more like a lymphoma. I do not know what that means, but I do think it entitles me to be able to doubly enjoy this awareness month. It is not unlike celebrating both Christmas and Hanukkah, except that the only presents one gets for either are something unexciting such as socks.

If I were only required to share this month with my almost-other cancer, lymphoma, then I might be okay with it. But a closer review of the “cancer calendar” reveals a disturbing fact: September is the awareness period of a whopping total of seven cancers. Seven! The most any other month hosts is five, and one of those is not even a cancer but a recognition of cancer caregivers. Clearly, it is not a competition. All cancers are as evil as they come, but doesn’t it dilute the effectiveness somewhat of making people aware if there are more cancers than people can count? And, to make matters worse, among September’s seven (which actually makes sense since “sept” is the prefix for seven) is childhood cancer. Well that is a catch-all for any type of cancer that children could be so unfortunate as to get. Thus, effectively, September is awareness month for all cancers (except for maybe cancer varieties that children fortunately cannot develop — like, possibly, prostate — except that prostate cancer is already on the September cancer scorecard!).

I don’t wish to pick a fight with any other cancer survivors/endurers/warriors — we are all in this together. But when I review the annual line-up, I am confused why September has so many while January has but one — cervical. I am as against cervical cancer as any other — including my own

— but would it not help to make people more aware of, say, thyroid cancer, which is also crammed into September if we moved it to the first month of the year along with cervical? If, as seems to be implied by the overscheduling of September, a month can handle more than one cancer and still be awareifying, then would it not stand to reason that just two cancers could be so enlightening in a single month?

Another suggestion, in case the cervical cancer-January tie-in must remain exclusive — a point about which I express no opinion — is February. February is of course the shortest month, thereby disadvantaging any cancer assigned to it. Even in a leap year, that is at best two days less to be cancer-cognizant than seven of the other months of the year. But, currently, February is only time to recognize gall bladder/bile duct cancer. No disrespect to those cancers, but they are only sharing the month with National Cancer Prevention, which is not actually, of course, a cancer. It's really the opposite of cancer. Plus, I feel like every day should be a cancer prevention day. Granted, we do not really know how to prevent cancer, but maybe if we spent more than 28/29 days a year thinking about it we would be on to something.

Just like January and February, July is also home to only one cancer's awareness — bone/sarcoma. I am not sure why this is the case — perhaps it is because we like to feel good about ourselves in July, touting our independence and all. And cancer can be somewhat of a downer, arguably. But given what we now are being told about the carcinogenic issues associated with firing up the grills — an activity as much a part of the 4th as fireworks and lost fingers therefrom — perhaps we should be more cognizant of cancer that month. Maybe if we lightened September's burden a bit by moving a couple cancers to mid-summer we could have less need for cancer awareness in the long run. Just an idea.

There are two months, however, that are cancer-awareness free. Apparently, during both August and December, one is allowed — maybe even implicitly encouraged — to not give any thought to cancers at all. As noted, cancer can sometimes be a bit of conversation clunker, and no one wants to have a vacation ruined by talk of tumors or chemotherapy. But at least when it comes to August, when many people eschew common sense — by which I really mean sunscreen — maybe it would be salutary to remind those beachgoers about cancer. Currently, we appreciate skin cancer in May, but in most of the country the weather is still too iffy for much outdoor time. Unlike August. If we moved skin cancer awareness to August, maybe we could prevent some cancers and give National Cancer Prevention a well-deserved month off.

Finally, when it comes to the final month, would December not be an excellent time to raise cancer awareness? People are already reaching into their wallets for every street corner bell-ringer and are constantly being reminded of those in need. How about reaching a bit deeper and giving to cancer research and prevention? That is a gift that really could be meaningful and do countless people a world of good. Plus, no one wants those socks under the tree (or menorah) anyway.

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