

Opinion: Shining a light on the ‘taboo’ cancer

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WATCHING Steve Jobs waste away from cancer was tragic for all the reasons expressed by President Obama, Apple executives, Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and Steve’s millions of fans online and in tributes at Apple stores.

But one more reason that losing Steve Jobs is painful for me personally: He was cut down in the prime of life by pancreatic cancer, which killed my father at 63, despite his daily runs through [Englewood Cliffs](#) training for four marathons, and my friend’s husband at 57, and will mercilessly snuff out 37,000 of the 44,000 Americans diagnosed this year, leaving shell-shocked families behind.

Nothing much has changed since Michael Landon went on the “Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson in 1991 and reluctantly named his silent killer, the largely inoperable cancer that typically offers no symptoms until stage IV.

Pancreatic cancer continues its reign of terror as the taboo cancer, mentioned in hushed tones and with a shaking of the head, as CNN’s Sanjay Gupta of CNN demonstrated the night Steve Jobs died, grimly repeating the American Cancer Society statistics: 20 percent of patients survive one year after detection. Only 4 percent of patients survive five years.

We were met with the same hopelessness and head shaking in 1997 when we sought experts to help my father. “It’s an insidious disease,” one doctor tsk-tsked, ushering us out of his office with no offer of surgery or treatment to give my father a fighting chance.

The doctor didn’t say it, no one wanted to say it, but the gut-wrenching message was “Go home and die.”

Resources not enough

Even Job’s immense resources were powerless to beat this form of cancer. Even the cutting-edge work of Nobel laureate Dr. Ralph Steinman, who died of pancreatic cancer three days before the prize was awarded, couldn’t save him. Amazingly, Steinman used a new vaccine against cancer, which he was in the midst of developing to try and fight his own tumor.

It didn’t work. But it can, in the future.

Research doctors like Steinman, who demonstrate the revolutionary vision that Jobs is recognized for, need more support.

Pancreatic cancer continues to be a death sentence partly because it is the least funded of all cancers: of the five leading cancer killers, pancreatic cancer receives the last amount of federal funding, according to the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network.

And it's not a rare disease: It's the fourth-leading cause of cancer death in the United States. Recently, Patrick Swayze, Randy Pausch and Luciano Pavarotti succumbed to it.

Where there is money, however, there is progress toward early detection, treatment and a cure.

Pancreatic cancer need not rob us of loved ones, need not to be a scourge on our children's generation. Just a few decades ago, breast, prostate and colon cancers must have seemed so scary and so daunting. There is reason to be optimistic.

There is also far to go.

I hope that the grief over losing Steve Jobs will transform into activism, as it did when Marc Lustgarten, an executive of Cablevision, died in 1998. Cablevision helped establish The Lustgarten Foundation to defeat pancreatic cancer: It has become the largest private foundation dedicated solely to funding pancreatic cancer research.

Public service campaign

The foundation has also launched curePC, a public service campaign to raise awareness, featuring Danny Aiello, William Hurt, Jai Pausch and Matthew Modine, all of whom have lost loved ones to the disease.

Last year at Run for George, a family day walk/run fund-raiser held by my family in [Englewood Cliffs](#) in memory of my father, where we also have carnival games, silent auction and lunch, we raffled off an iPad to raise research dollars.

This year, on Nov. 20, we'll raffle off an iPad2.

This one's for you, Steve.