New Studies Examine Role of Crowdfunding Campaigns to Pay Medical Expenses for Patients Treated for Cancer

The American Cancer Society led research to be presented at the 2023 ASCO Quality Care Symposium

ATLANTA, October 28, 2023 — In two new abstracts by researchers at the American Cancer Society (ACS), crowdfunding campaigns, like GoFundMe, are being used by survivors of cancer in the United States in growing numbers to help pay for medical and other basic household expenses. The use of these campaigns underscores the fragility of financial safety nets for patients and their families. The findings will be presented at the annual American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) Quality Care Symposium in Boston, October 27 – 28, 2023.

In the first study, led by Dr. Jason Zheng, senior principal scientist, health services research at the American Cancer Society, scientists reviewed over one hundred thousand fundraiser stories related to cancer from Jan 2022 to June 2023 GoFundMe campaigns. Additional campaign information gathered included organizer's information, fundraising goal, amount of money raised, and donation records. A brief survey was designed and implemented to analyze each fundraiser story to extract cancer survivors' sociodemographic characteristics, medical financial hardship, and unmet social needs. The information included beneficiary's age, cancer site and stage, time since diagnosis, treatment status, employment status and work disruption due to cancer, school absenteeism and parent's work disruption, lack of sick leave, income loss, struggles with expenses for medical treatments, housing, food, transportation, and monthly bills.

Researchers found that among 102,375 cancer-related fundraiser stories, the most common cancer sites included breast (n=16,321), brain (n=9,763), leukemia (n=6,888), and lung (n=5,679). Among cancer survivors less than 18 years old (n=9,520), 12.6% experienced school absenteeism and 11.2% described family-level problems of paying housing-related expenses. Among working cancer survivors 18 years old and above (n=10,780), frequently listed reasons for financial support needs included work disruption (90.9%) income loss (69.4%), and lack of sick leave (56.2%). Among all adult cancer survivors (n=14,410), frequently listed reasons for needing financial support included struggles with expenses for medical treatments (47.5%) and for housing (5.2%), food (5.5%), and transportation (5.3%).

Scientists in this first study emphasized that the examination of fundraising stories can provide important insights into the types of financial hardship experienced by cancer survivors and inform future interventions.

In the second, larger study led by Shaojun Yu, a Ph.D. student intern at the American Cancer Society, researchers showed the annual amount of money raised in crowdfunding campaigns increased substantially in the last decade. However, only a small percentage of campaigns reach their financial goals.

Scientists obtained crowdfunding data from the GoFundMe website from 2012-2022. Campaign details such as category, organizer information, fundraiser story, fundraising goal, amount of money raised, and donation records was collected.

Of the nearly 2.3 million crowdfunding campaigns retrieved, 490,008 (21.3%) fund-raising events were due to personal medical reasons. There were 33 million donation records, and 3.4 billion dollars were raised for personal medical reasons, with the average amount being $6,893 per campaign. The annual amount of money raised increased over time, from about $655k in 2012 to $68.4 million in 2022. About 15.1% of the campaigns reached their fundraising goals. California, Texas, and New York – three of the most populous states - were the top three states in terms of the total amount of money raised. Cancer-related fundraising events accounted for 41.1% of all medical campaigns with a total amount of $1.6 billion raised, and the average amount of money raised was $7,860.

Authors of this report emphasized future studies are warranted to analyze fundraiser stories to understand the contents and severity of financial hardship caused by cancer in this population.

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About the American Cancer Society
The American Cancer Society is a leading cancer-fighting organization with a vision to end cancer as we know it, for everyone. For more than 100 years, we have been improving the lives of people with cancer and their families as the only organization combating cancer through advocacy, research, and patient support. We are committed to ensuring everyone has an opportunity to prevent, detect, treat, and survive cancer. To learn more, visit cancer.org or call our 24/7 helpline at 1-800-227-2345. Connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

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