

Cancer screening can save countless lives

By JENNIFER JONES AUSTIN

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I wake up daily with gratitude, appreciating that but for ever-evolving medicine, I likely would not be alive. After suddenly falling deathly ill and being diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia (AML) with a 1% chance of survival, I was able to receive a life-saving stem cell transplant using the cells obtained from the umbilical cord blood of two African-American newborn babies. Without this innovation in medicine, I likely wouldn't be here.

Every year, [millions of people](#) receive a surprising diagnosis of cancer, and for some the news comes too late. For me, there was no physical or visible sign. Just days before the near-fatal diagnosis, as the cancer was beginning to wreak havoc on my body and I developed a persistent high-grade fever as my body attempted to fight it, I was triaged in one of the better New York City hospitals and told I was suffering with a virus that required nothing more than Advil and rest.



A patient sitting with his doctor. (Shutterstock/Shutterstock)

I had no way of knowing I was sick with cancer. I was one of the exceedingly unexceptional “healthy” people who still got sick. I ate the “correct diet,” exercised daily, went to the doctor regularly, and paid attention to what my body was saying. And I got cancer. I learned the hard way that you can do all the “right” things, and still, cancer may be lurking deep inside your body.

[Black and Brown women](#) are among those who are more likely to suffer and pass away from cancer due to the inadequate levels of

care we often receive from doctors, and overexposure to unhealthy factors and stressors that make us more susceptible. It's just one more structural inequity we experience in our daily lives.

What would have altered my situation and kept me from getting so close to death's door is a test to detect cancerous cells before they have a chance to develop into a problem. Tragically, such a test exists but many aren't aware or can't afford it. Access to a broad-based screening for cancer is available, but limited and beyond what insurance will cover, making the cost of testing prohibitive for most.

[Illumina](#) and its former subsidiary, Grail, have created a screening that uses genomic mapping to test for cancer. Illumina's technology has been used in testing COVID across the world, for family lineage DNA testing, and fighting a myriad of diseases through targeting and prevention. With their broad network of reimbursement and marketing, their machines have successfully made it into facilities across the globe. Married with the innovative Galleri test, Illumina creates the prospect of a world where all people can be screened for 40+ variants of cancer at little-to-no cost. It is clear the test can be both accessible and save lives.

President Biden and his administration have set their [sights on the goal of ending cancer](#) — something we all want to see. To make the president’s vision a reality, we must expose cancer where it is happening as soon as possible and focus particularly on marginalized communities. The administration can and should welcome all partners to the table in their goal of ending cancer and leverage all agencies in the federal government to get cancer testing into patients’ hands as a standard of care.

Illumina’s Galleri test has the capacity to be a game-changer in the fight against cancer. Our federal government can work to ensure every insurance company, union fund, Medicare and state Medicaid office covers comprehensive cancer screening that otherwise remains restrictive. It is a matter of coordinated smart, decisive government action living up to its promises.

All over this country, there are people suffering and dying from cancer, and disproportionately they are Black and Brown. Shouldn’t we be utilizing the resources available to us to prevent their pain? Let’s fight cancer at the source and get tests into people’s hands before it has the chance to rob them and their families of life’s most precious commodity — time.

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