

Much Ado About Health Observances

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By Ross K. Goldberg

To say that healthcare enjoys honoring itself is a lot like saying World War II was noisy. This is an industry drunken with healthcare days, weeks and months of observances. Every disease, every department within a hospital and every cause that understands the value of marketing gets its accolades. This tizzy has become so swirling that the Society for Healthcare Strategy and Market Development publishes a 60-page booklet each year just to keep it all straight.



In May alone there are 25 month-long celebrations, 11 weeklong observances and eight “days” of honor. That’s 44 observances in a month that has 31 days. Guess some days you need to double-up. October has 43. But with only five celebrations in July and four in December, it is apparent that it’s not as important to celebrate our health when we are on vacation or waiting for reindeer.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not complaining about the moments we celebrate, although I am not sure we need Healthcare Recruiters Recognition Day (June 22) or Healthcare Supply Chain Week (October 4-10). I am more concerned about those we don’t. Here are five I propose adding to the carnival:

Accountability Month – Much has been written concerning the emergence and value of accountable care organizations (ACOs). But ACOs still place accountability on the healthcare industry. Let’s pause one month to educate the public that the real accountability lays with them...not hospitals, physicians or health plans. The idea that

people can live any kind of lifestyle they choose and the “system” will take care of them is simply not a sustainable model. People need to smoke less, exercise more and eat healthier. America’s healthcare system would be much improved if everyone would walk five miles a day. And if we are sincere in our desire to address the root cause of unnecessary and avoidable medical costs and suffering, it’s time to squarely confront the epidemic of violence that ruins lives and robs resources from the prevention and treatment of other illnesses. This is the “ask not” moment....not what healthcare can do for you, but what you can do for healthcare.

Spend Money More Wisely Week – Each year in late March, hospitals collectively spend millions of dollars on full-page ads saluting their medical staff on National Doctors’ Day. Six weeks later these same hospitals incur these same expenses again by saying “thank you” to their nurses during National Nurses Week...and two weeks later they go down the same costly road saluting all employees (and themselves) during Hospital Week. These look-alike ads have been leached of any real meaning and it is incomprehensible that they have any impact on where a physician refers patients, where a nurse chooses to work, or where a consumer chooses to go for his or her care. Let’s stop this foolishness and instead allocate one week to put these dollars towards something that really speaks to the heart of our profession such as prenatal or palliative care.

Plain Speak Day – I would like to make this a week, a month or an eternity, but I’ll settle for one day each year when healthcare professionals are required to refrain from using any technical jargon when speaking with patients, families, co-workers, the media or others who are often too intimidated or too shy to ask “what the heck are you talking about?” Health exchanges rely on individuals becoming engaged in making intelligent healthcare decisions, but how can they do that if they don’t understand even the basics? We want hospitals to be transparent in displaying quality dashboard and pricing, but data needs to be understood in order to become actionable information. Patients and providers should be partners in healthcare, but using words consumers don’t understand simply makes the distance between us that much greater.

Cure Something Month – Modern medicine is truly miraculous and we have come a long way since the discovery of penicillin. Cancer and HIV are no longer automatic

death sentences and wonderful new drugs are giving hope to millions with arthritis and other chronic conditions. But let's be honest: when was the last time we actually cured something and eradicated an entire disease category? Cancer? No. Heart disease? No. Alzheimer's, muscular dystrophy, diabetes? No, no and no. Let's take a month to check our egos at the door and have a serious discussion about why we can put a man on the moon, but we haven't cured anything since small pox. Let's give ourselves the credit we deserve for making living with disease more tolerable, but let's also say that's not enough: it's time to take the next step on this scientific journey. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a presidential candidate make curing cancer the centerpiece of his/her campaign?

60 Over 60 Day – It is a young world we live in and the healthcare media continues to remind us of that by honoring “30 under 30” or “40 under 40.” But if 60 is the new 40 as we are led to believe, isn't it time to honor “60 over 60” – those healthcare veterans still very much in their prime and making a major contribution to the industry at an age when past generations were out to pasture. Better still, I would like to see “70 over 70” or “80 over 80.” Let's do this on November 20, the birthday of Robert Kennedy who, though he never lived to see these milestone ages, was apt to frequently remind us that “youth is not a time of life but a state of mind; a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination.”

If we had a few more of these types of days on the calendar, it would be a lot easier for me to tolerate Root Canal Awareness Week every March.

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