



Testimony in Favor:

LD 665: An Act To Promote Better Dental Care for Cancer Survivors

Representative Craven and Members of the Health Coverage, Insurance and Financial Services Committee,

My name is Rebecca Berry, a dentist practicing in Oakland, Maine, and am writing in favor of LD 665: An Act To Restrict To Promote Better Dental Care for Cancer Survivors.

I am a cancer survivor and a dentist. I understand the pain, trauma and fight cancer patients must endure during and after treatment. I also understand the crucial importance of providing quality, comprehensive dental care to cancer survivors.

I advocate for those who need quality, comprehensive dental care in their darkest hours.

Here's what you need to know:

Imagine you are given the worst medical news of your life. You have cancer. Then you are poisoned (chemotherapy), burned (radiation) and cut up (surgery) to attempt to keep this intruder at bay. Maybe you are like me and you do not have to imagine this because you have lived it. Or maybe your parent, spouse, or best friend has lived it and you were there to witness the poisoning, the burning, and the surgeries.

Now imagine you have conquered cancer (for now). That does not mean the fight is over.

Maybe the treatment to save your life made you vomit every day for a year and the acid has eroded your teeth and they are crumbling. You cannot chew without pain. Gaining back some semblance of health is nearly impossible if you cannot chew and eat healthy foods.

Maybe you had a tumor in your sinus and the surgery to save your life left you with a hole connecting your mouth to your nasal cavity. You cannot swallow or eat without anything you put in your mouth rushing into your nose. To put it into perspective, think back to a time you have been swept off your feet by a wave in the ocean and your nose has been filled full of sea water.

It is not comfortable to say the least. This is what those with a hole in their nasal cavity, caused by cancer, feel each time they eat or drink.

Maybe the burning to try to kill the tumor has reduced your salivary gland function to almost zero. You no longer have the protective effect of saliva and you will never regain because although the cancer is dead so are your glands. You have a lifetime of extreme dry mouth inevitable leading to dental decay and tooth loss. Now you have not only lost your gland function, you have lost your teeth as well.

Medical insurance companies will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on treatment for a single cancer patient, but regulate away the teeth and mouth. Teeth and mouth are part of the body—at least mine are, and I assume yours are as well—and they need to be treated as such.

What you can do:

After my chemotherapy I lost all my hair, as many patients do. I was devastated. I felt terrible inside and out. I wanted a wig to give me some sense of normalcy and my insurance company covered the expense. I wore it and eventually my hair grew back.

However, I had no coverage for a dental cleaning, fluoride treatment or tooth removal. Zero dollars to help maintain my dental health—despite all of the cancer-related health risks outlined in the paragraphs above.

Lucky for me, I am a dentist and have access to unlimited dental care. Unfortunately this is not the norm, and all of these tragic health events (abscess, loss of gland function, etc.) are real risks for cancer survivors—with no coverage to help them receive adequate treatment.

From a medical standpoint, dental care is crucial to overall health. Having teeth and a mouth free of injury and abscess also provides a gateway to eating healthy foods and gaining proper nutrition. Once a tooth is damaged by cancer treatment, it cannot fix itself on its own. Once there is a hole in your mouth from cancer treatment, it will not heal on its own. Swift, skilled dental treatment is needed to keep dental-related cancer survivor risk at bay.

For these reasons, comprehensive quality dental care should be included as a crucial step in all cancer survivor treatment.

Supporting LD665 means supporting your parent, your spouse, your best friend, or maybe even yourself, for help when you will need it most. I urge you to support this legislation. I am always happy to discuss any questions or concerns you may have regarding this legislation or any other.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Rebecca Berry, DMD