CHRIS CLARK
CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS, CANADIAN PARTNERSHIP AGAINST CANCER

PROGRESS IN PARTNERSHIP
Chris Clark, a champion for improving the experience for individuals battling cancer, is at the forefront of an organisation that strives to reduce the burden of this complex disease. Here, in the powerful first instalment of a two-part interview, he discusses his own experience of dealing with cancer, the parallels between his personal battle and leadership, and his hopes for the future in the face of this prevalent health challenge.

Could you outline the main objectives and methodologies of the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer?

We are a non-profit, federally-funded organisation responsible for implementing Canada's cancer control strategy. Our work is done with, and through, our partners across the country; including provincial cancer agencies and programmes, governments—who are ultimately responsible for the delivery of cancer services in the provinces and territories—and healthcare professionals, policy makers, NGOs, patients and advocacy groups.

Our goal is to leverage the approximately CAD $50 million annual investment we receive in activities that support change at the system level, and drive the implementation of new research results and best practices across Canada. These efforts cover the spectrum of cancer control, including prevention, screening, treatment, and support for patients throughout the cancer journey.

With the support of our partners, our work is focused on reducing the burden of cancer for all Canadians through coordinated system-level change to ensure that three long-term goals are achieved: fewer Canadians develop cancer; more Canadians are successfully treated; and those living with cancer have better quality of life during treatment and beyond. We do this by convening the necessary expertise; brokering knowledge and best practices; investing in and catalysing large-scale, multi-jurisdictional efforts; and integrating improvements in quality of practice across the country.

First established in 2007, what tangible progress has the Partnership made during its first six years?

I believe we have made significant progress in transforming the way Canada's cancer control community works together to effect coordinated, system-level change. As a founding board member, I've seen first-hand how health professionals and organisations are now working together differently to share knowledge, establish relationships across geographical boundaries, and increase consistency in practice.

When we first began in 2007, the Partnership was establishing a new model in Canada for how to work across geographic, organisational and professional boundaries to accelerate progress in cancer control. In our first five-year mandate our focus was on building relationships and achieving key deliverables. As we've moved into our second mandate, our focus with partners has shifted to achieving measurable cancer control outcomes.

Could you introduce your background and the duties you currently fulfil as Chair of the Board of Directors?

I come from a business background and spent 33 years with the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers where I was the CEO and...
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At PricewaterhouseCoopers, I developed a leading-edge wellness programme for all of our employees and counselled staff at all levels that were facing similar health challenges. I also became involved as part of a support network for others across the country who were dealing specifically with head and neck cancer.

I am also a sounding board for the CEO; we work together to ensure our board meeting agendas are appropriately focused.

The Board must fulfill numerous duties and obligations to ensure the organisation is compliant within the funding agreement from the federal government and that good governance is in place. More importantly though, it has a critical role in helping management define its strategy and the outcomes it must achieve to meet its immediate and longer-term goals. As Chair, it’s my responsibility to ensure we’re operating effectively as a board, discharging our formal obligations while at the same time adding value to management. I am also a sounding board for the CEO; we work together to ensure our board meeting agendas are appropriately focused.

What changes have you seen in cancer control since you were first elected Chair in 2012?

The 2012-13 year marked the beginning of the Partnership’s second five-year mandate. The fact that our mandate was extended for a second five years is confirmation in itself that the early work of having a national cancer control strategy is making a difference to Canadians. I can’t say that in the space since I became chair there have been dramatic changes. However, with our focus on measurable outcomes and what we’ll achieve in cancer control within the next 10 years and beyond, we are making a difference, particularly in the ways our partners now work together to implement change.

Our system performance reports provide a way for us to understand how we’re faring across the country on a series of indicators across the full cancer control continuum. By reporting results annually, we are able to identify opportunities to improve cancer control and care across the country.

As I meet with our partners across the country, I hear concrete examples of how a collaborative approach to cancer control – sharing best practices and pooling resources – is effective in driving the change that will lessen the impact of cancer on Canadians.

Our successes today, however, are only steps along a much longer journey. We look forward to making a broader and deeper impact as we move forward, with our partners, towards meaningful and measurable outcomes that will reduce the burden of cancer on all Canadians.

On a personal level, having yourself been diagnosed with cancer, how did overcoming this personal crisis help shape the work you do today?

I was diagnosed with tongue cancer on 7 May 2006; a day I will never forget. There is no doubt that going through the physical and emotional impact of dealing with a life-threatening disease such as cancer has an effect on one’s outlook to life. Having said that, cancer didn’t fundamentally change me as a person and it certainly didn’t make me simply want to fill my days smelling roses or walking on the beach. However, I did stop worrying about some of the small things I worried about before, and I became much more appreciative of what is important in life and what I wanted to do.

I also believe that as a cancer survivor I had an ability to give back to others who might be facing a similar challenge in a way that not many people can and began to go about this in a number of ways.

I have always been involved with not-for-profit organisations within the arts, education and health sectors but I specifically looked much more closely at cancer organisations in Canada where I thought my skills and experiences could be put to best use and make a difference. This resulted in me joining the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer and I have enjoyed my time here tremendously over the past seven years.

Canadian Senior Partner for six years; a position I retired from in 2011. I currently serve as a corporate director on a variety of public company boards including Loblaw’s, Brookfield and Air Canada. I have also served on a variety of not-for-profit boards, which now include Alpine Canada and the Queen’s University School of Business, in addition to the Partnership.
Further to this, you’ve spoken before about the impact of an experience with cancer on leadership. Could you describe this in more detail?

Looking back on my cancer journey, I see many parallels between my battle against cancer and leadership in general. When I was first diagnosed, I knew that to overcome cancer I had to focus on what I could control, and what I needed to do to get better. This included keeping my emotions – anger, denial, fear – in check.

This is similar to what leaders are faced with in crisis. No matter what the adversity or how big the problem, a leader must always show a positive attitude to his or her people. If the leader doesn’t emit good vibrations and focus on the positive, then that attitude permeates the entire organisation. At the same time, it was important when communicating my challenge to all our people to show emotion, so that others saw me not just a leader, but as a human being too, with my own hopes and fears just like them. A culture of open and transparent two-way communication of both the good and the bad is critical to developing trust in leadership.

A big lesson for me from my battle with cancer was gaining the ability to empathise in a different way with people who are facing challenges in their lives, whether they be professional or personal. I learned to be aware of friends and colleagues who may be facing their own challenges and of the importance of reaching out to them.

During my battle with cancer, I had to trust the talents and skills of those who were advising me, and believe that everything would turn out for the best. Translating that lesson into leadership is a useful reminder that reliance on others is critical and that to be able to do so you must invest in your people and ensure that you are attracting, developing and retaining them for the future. The ultimate role of a leader is not to get other people to follow but to empower others to lead.

As such a complex and prevalent health challenge, do you think there is enough research conducted in this area? Will a cure ever be within reach?

As a cancer survivor, I certainly hope that one day a cure will be within our reach. Cancer is a terrible disease which inflicts great physical and emotional pain on many people.

We have to believe that the investment and effort put into research will lead to answers. History has shown this to be true for other diseases, and we’ve already seen remarkable progress in the ability to treat certain kinds of cancers. We’ve also identified means of finding cancers earlier, through screening for example, that provide the opportunity to treat cancers at a stage when they are more likely to be cured.

I think the Canadian Partnership for Tomorrow Project has great promise in this area. By recruiting over 300,000 Canadians to participate, we’ve developed the means to ask powerful questions about risk factors and the causes of cancers and chronic diseases in an unprecedented way. The commitment of study participants to contribute their data year after year provides a means to ask important research questions for years to come, and will be an important legacy of the cancer strategy.

We also support the Canadian Cancer Research Alliance, an organisation that reports on cancer research investment in Canada. Their work provides an interesting picture of where we’re currently investing, and where more research may be required given the outcomes we’re currently seeing. As an example, head and neck cancers, pancreatic cancer and other more rare cancers typically have poorer outcomes and survival rates, and we currently don’t have many effective treatment options for them. It will be important to focus our research efforts in these areas in the future.