

Baseball swings, misses at cancer

Major League Baseball isn't standing tall enough against cancer, in spite of its partnership with Stand Up To Cancer, a fundraising organization for cancer research. Before a national TV audience of more than 15 million on Friday night during Game Three of the World Series, Major League Baseball missed a golden opportunity to send a message to the public that a third of all cancer deaths can be prevented.



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At the end of the sixth inning, Major League Baseball officials, players, umpires and fans stood silently in the stands and in the dugouts, each holding a placard with the name of someone with cancer. But this wasn't just another plea to give money for cancer research. It was also a tribute by Major League Baseball to the late Tony Gwynn, the Hall of Fame outfielder and eight-time American League batting champion, who died this year from cancer at age 54. Yet there was no mention of the type of cancer that killed him — cancer of the salivary glands — or the fact that since oral cancer is almost always caused by cigarette smoking or smokeless tobacco, it is almost entirely avoidable.

Tony Gwynn himself blamed his 20-year addiction to smokeless tobacco for his oral cancer, and urged young people never to use it. Another baseball great, former Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt

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Schilling, 47, revealed this year that his use of chewing tobacco led to his oral cancer. And Doug Harvey, named the second greatest umpire by the Society for American Baseball Research, attributed his oral cancer to smokeless tobacco use.

Harvey has shared his story with college athletes throughout the U.S., including the University of Alabama, as has Heisman Trophy winner Pat Sullivan, another sports star who developed cancer of the tongue from the use of smokeless tobacco. According to the Alabama Department of Health, an estimated 19 percent of high school boys used smokeless tobacco in 2012, much higher than the national prevalence of 11.2 percent, and the rate is rising.

In its four nationally televised fundraising telethons, Stand Up To Cancer has never shown or talked about the disfigurement and emotional toll of oral cancer and its treatment, much less used its valuable air time for a call to America's youth to avoid tobacco at any cost. Just send money, no questions asked, no judgments made.

In fairness to Major League Baseball, in 2011 its officials tried to follow the lead of Minor League Baseball in 1993 and the NCAA in 1994 by barring players from using smokeless tobacco, but the Major League Baseball Players' Association rejected the idea. More than 30 percent of Major League Baseball players are still estimated to be using smokeless tobacco, although the number is down from 50 percent just a decade ago. Two top pitchers, Stephen

Strasburg and Addison Reed, who both played for Gwynn at San Diego State, have quit smokeless tobacco in tribute to their coach.

Cancer is not a single disease but more than 200 different kinds of diseases, many of which are caused entirely by tobacco and are thus avoidable. Similarly, malignant melanoma, one of the most rapidly increasing cancers among young women — and among the most lethal — can be largely prevented by the avoidance of sunburns and tanning beds. Yet the very group who should be avoiding tanning beds at all costs — college students — are the ones who use tanning beds the most. Not surprisingly, they're the group that tanning salons target in their advertising, especially in college newspapers.

While we need to support cancer research, we should not do so at the expense of educating the public at every opportunity about the things we already know how to do to prevent the majority of cancers. Most people think they've heard all the facts about smoking, smokeless tobacco and tanning beds. But haven't we already seen and heard plenty about the different brands of smokeless tobacco and tanning salons? Apparently not, because otherwise they wouldn't need to be working so hard to get their message out and to try to hook the next generation.

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