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Lawmakers share how diabetes has affected their families; urge participation in World Diabetes Day at state Capitol

(For digital audio, go to www.oksenate.gov and select “media”)

When someone is diagnosed with diabetes, their life can change drastically. Those changes can be stressful, isolating, frightening and expensive. It’s something Sen. Roger Thompson, R-Okemah, and Sen. Frank Simpson, R-Springer, know about firsthand. Thompson currently serves as chair of the Legislature’s Diabetes Caucus and Simpson serves as vice-chair. It was something both men wanted to do because of what their families have gone through after loved ones were diagnosed with diabetes.

The legislators are urging the public to come to the state Capitol on November 14, for World Diabetes Day. The event will help people learn more about the disease, the importance of testing, and get information to help stay healthier.

Diabetes is a group of diseases that affects how the body uses blood sugar, or glucose. People with diabetes have too much glucose in their blood, which in turn leads to serious health problems. It’s the leading cause of kidney failure, non-traumatic lower-limb amputations and new cases of blindness among adults in the United States. It’s considered to be an epidemic, world-wide, nationally, and here in Oklahoma.

Both Thompson and Simpson understand all too well the impact diabetes can have on families.

Thompson’s son, Lynn, now in his 30s, was a teenager when he first began developing symptoms—he was 21 when was diagnosed with Type I “brittle” diabetes. While Type 2 diabetes can often be successfully controlled with diet and exercise, those with Type 1 must take insulin. Even with insulin, individuals with brittle diabetes have a particularly difficult time regulating blood sugar, putting them at even greater risk for complications.

“He’s suffered multiple strokes, and sudden changes in his blood sugar levels can cause him to lose consciousness. He’s been in accidents as a result of that. There have been times when other family members have been frustrated because they don’t understand the limitations and complications, so we’ve had to try to educate them,” Thompson said. “There are ongoing problems with insurance companies that will cover a needed medication, and then stop covering it. The out-of-pocket expenses are at least \$1200 a month. It’s something that as a whole, really affects an entire family, and thousands of Oklahoma families are facing this.”

Thompson said during one frightening medical incident, his son’s blood sugar level dropped to 32, when a normal level is closer to 100. It was a critical health situation, but a local law enforcement officer thought it was a case of someone being under the influence and took him to jail. Another officer who knew the family spoke up and said this was the result of a diabetic medical incident and contacted the family, but Thompson said it still took 24 hours to get his son released. He said it was a frustrating and potentially dangerous situation.

Simpson’s granddaughter, Payslee, was just 12 when she was diagnosed with Type I diabetes. She died this past June at the age of 29 from heart disease—one of many serious health complications faced by diabetics.

“The physical risks were dangerous and life-threatening, but we could take care of those,” Simpson said. “For her, probably the biggest problem was the emotional and psychological impact. Living in a small Texas town, the only child with diabetes, she felt like an oddity, like there was something wrong with her. It was devastating for her.”

Simpson believes his granddaughter’s inability to handle the stress of being a diabetic later resulted in her not doing what was necessary to keep her diabetes in check once she became a young adult. He said that was likely a factor in the cardiac complications that caused Payslee’s untimely death.

(more)

Through the Diabetic Caucus, Simpson said his goal is to create an awareness with the public and to let families dealing with this know they aren't alone.

“Because of my granddaughter, I’ve really tried to reach out to young adults between the ages of 18 and 24. They leave the house and no longer have their parents’ supervision to make sure they are monitoring their blood sugar and staying on top of their insulin. They think they know better and don’t realize how dangerous this can be,” Simpson said. “I share what happened to Payslee in the hopes of saving another family from experiencing a similar tragedy. Twenty-nine is too young for a young lady to die.”

While Thompson’s family has long been dealing with the impact of Type I diabetes, they later learned his wife was at risk for Type II diabetes. A visit to her doctor revealed she was pre-diabetic. Thompson said the diagnosis came as a shock.

“She’s petite, she’s always watched what she ate and she exercised some. To look at her you’d never have thought she was pre-diabetic,” Thompson said.

Thompson said that diagnosis means more medical expenses for the family. It’s estimated that people with diabetes have medical expenses approximately 2.3 times higher than those who do not have diabetes.

“We’ll have more out-of-pocket expenses, but we’ll handle it. We’ll be fine, but a lot of Oklahoma families aren’t,” Thompson said. “We’ve got to do better. We must do better.”

Both Simpson and Thompson said families dealing with diabetes need more help and support. The lawmakers urged Oklahomans throughout the state to attend World Diabetes Day at the Capitol this coming Monday.

“Senator Simpson and I are not unique. It affects thousands of families across Oklahoma. We want them to come, and learn what’s going on, but we also want them to know we’re all struggling. Come and be a part of this. Create this working relationship and look for answers for your family, because even since I’ve been involved in the caucus, I’ve learned things I didn’t even know about that can help our family,” Thompson said. “Come to this day, learn, engage, and I think your family will be better off for it.”

World Diabetes Day will be held at the state Capitol on Monday, November 14, from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. on the fourth floor rotunda and in the House chamber. The event is open to the public.

“I think it can be a source of strength and encouragement for families to see they aren’t the only ones dealing with this,” Simpson said. “Just because Senator Thompson and I are elected officials, it doesn’t mean our families are immune from those same problems and those same pains that so many families are suffering with. They’re not alone and they may learn something at this event that can help them improve their lifestyle and health.”

For more information, contact Sen. Roger Thompson at 405-521-5588 or Sen. Simpson at 405-521-5607.

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CUTLINE: Sen. Roger Thompson, R-Okemah, and Sen. Frank Simpson, R-Springer, talk about the impact of diabetes on thousands of Oklahoma families, including their own. Thompson serves as chair and Simpson is vice-chair of the Legislative Diabetes Caucus. The lawmakers are urging Oklahomans to attend World Diabetes Day at the state Capitol on November 14.