

Fighting Cancer with Facebook

MED student on a mission taps the power of online social networking

IN HIGH SCHOOL, an X-ray revealed that Eric Ding had a baseball-size, potentially malignant tumor in his chest, and doctors gave him five years to live. But Ding, a track standout who regularly clocked five-minute miles, didn't let it slow him down.

Surgeons were able to remove the tumor, and from then on, says Ding (MED'12), "I realized that life is really short and you get one chance on this planet to make a difference."

He threw himself into the study of medicine and health, focusing on nutrition and cancer and graduating in three years from Johns Hopkins University with a degree in public health. He earned dual doctorates in epidemiology and nutrition from Harvard University by age twenty-four. Now a Soros Fellow at BU, Ding has since harnessed the power of online social networking to fuel his anticancer campaign.

He started up the Facebook cause for cancer prevention and research last May in order to spread reliable information about cancer risk factors and to solicit donations for the three-decade-old epidemiological Nurses' Health Study. By the end of the first week, his Facebook cause had attracted 10,000 members, an international support base that jumped to a million within three months and recently topped three million. He's since tapped this massive network to create the O Campaign Foundation, aimed at spurring innovative cancer research and, he hopes, forming the launching pad for a new epidemiological cancer study.

Ding is a part-time medical student at BU and a postdoctoral researcher in the department of nutrition at Harvard's School of Public Health, investigating the lifestyle and biochemical risk factors for diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

Last winter, Ding and college buddy Joe Chung, who had recently started a consulting and entrepreneurial services company in San Francisco, agreed that the cancer cause's growing network presented an opportunity to launch a full-fledged cancer research foundation: the O Campaign — the "O" symbolizing a full-circle approach to the disease.

Of course, transforming the rather easy allegiances of a Facebook network into a functioning foundation takes some doing, and Ding says the O Campaign is still very much "in its infancy stage."

They hope to raise enough money to sponsor large cash grants for individual cancer researchers, and they have assembled a scientific advisory board to help plan how to judge the potential recipients. Ding says the "O Prizes" will not fund basic laboratory research, but will support prevention and treatment innovations that can have "immediate and profound effects on patients' lives." For example, he says, early detection helps save lives, and screening tests exist for many cancers, but none reliably tests for ovarian or pancreatic cancer, which kill tens of thousands of Americans every year.

Ding's biggest goal is to establish an international epidemiological cancer prevention study using a core of volunteers from the millions who signed on to his Facebook cause.

"Everyone keeps e-mailing and asking, 'What can I do to help?'" says Ding.

CHRIS BERDIK

Eric Ding (MED'12) survived a life-threatening tumor in his chest and now uses Facebook to fight cancer.



JON TOWLE (COM'09)