

Terri's Final Irony

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by Jane Fleming, Alternet -- Republicans who disingenuously stood up for Terri Schiavo's life are the very ones who have blocked legislation that would have granted access to treatment of her eating disorder and that could help millions of women and men who suffer from mental illness.

Why is it ironic that Terri died of starvation? Because the reason she had a heart attack, which resulted in her 15-year life and death struggle, was her life and death struggle with an eating disorder.

The saddest part is Terri is not alone, one in 10 people who struggle with anorexia will die because of starvation, cardiac arrest or other complications, yet Republican leadership continues to block legislation to ensure full and equitable access to mental health treatment. If you watch TV or skim the papers, you would think the reason Terri was on life support for over a decade is because of some rare genetic disorder that did not have a cure. When I tell people it was because of an eating disorder, they are shocked.

Years ago, if Terri received the right treatment and recovery plan, she would be living a healthy life. Many people with eating disorders who get early and effective treatment fully recover within eight years ? I did.

It was not because my insurance plan or a government sponsored health program helped me or my family with the costs associated with treating my eating disorder--it was mostly out of pocket and cost my family over \$50,000. Not a bill many families can afford, not to mention how hard it is to admit their loved one struggles with eating and everything that comes along with a mental illness.

It is ironic Terri died of starvation ? but you know what is worse: Republicans who disingenuously stood up for her life are the very ones who have blocked legislation that would have granted access to treatment of her eating disorder and not only to Terri but to millions of women and men who suffer from anorexia, bulimia and binge-eating disorder.

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Rep. Hastert, who is Speaker of the House and who decides what bills come to the floor for a vote, has blocked the bi-partisan Wellstone-Domenici Mental Health Equitable Treatment Act year after year from coming to the floor for a vote. The bill even specifically mentions the treatment of eating disorders. According to Hastert, passing this bill would cost the taxpayers and insurance companies too much money.

The government and many independent studies have cited otherwise. It is the untreated mental illness that costs us--financially it is estimated at about \$113 billion annually, emotionally it is the look of individuals like Terri every day who never received the right care. This is not about taxpayers for Rep. Hastert and other Republican leaders. It is about winning a political battle. But guess what? People who struggle with mental illness are not a political battle to win or lose--we are human beings who deserve the right and access to affordable and effective treatment.

I hope, as a person who has recovered from an eating disorder, that we now force Rep. Hastert and Sen. Frist to bring the Mental Health Parity Bill to the floor of the Senate and the House for a vote so millions of Terris can get early access to the mental health treatment they need.

Recovery is possible, but it can't be done on will or God's love alone--early and effective medical and mental health treatment is necessary for a full recovery. Stop the irony, stop using Terri as a poster child for claims on morality and start saving millions of lives who need access to medical and mental health treatment to live their life fully and with integrity.

Jane Fleming is executive director of the Young Democrats of America and former executive director of the Renfrew Center Foundation for Eating Disorders. She can be contacted via e-mail at executivedirector@yda.org or at (202) 639-8585