

Health policy very personal for Fiorina

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Carly Fiorina launched her U.S. Senate campaign this month in a Garden Grove warehouse not with a promise or policy statement, but a simple question:

"What's with the hair?"

Fiorina, 55, had short, cropped hair after undergoing chemotherapy this summer, telling supporters she was a breast cancer survivor and making it clear she planned to embrace her experience during the campaign.

In recent days, Fiorina has talked more about her cancer experience than she might have envisioned. After a federal task force recommended last week that women get fewer mammograms, Fiorina turned her breast cancer story into a new campaign message.

Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, assailed the guidelines on various cable news shows. She told women to reject them and said she might not be alive if not for regular mammogram screenings and self checks.

Legislators in both parties have spoken against the guidelines for reduced preventive screenings, including Sen. Barbara Boxer, whom Fiorina hopes to unseat.

But Fiorina also has suggested the recommendations are a preview of health care under the federal overhaul that has been proposed, a position that plays well with the conservative voters she needs in the GOP primary.

Fiorina was diagnosed with breast cancer in February, had surgery in March and went through chemotherapy and radiation thereafter. Her aides acknowledged the disease throughout her treatment.

The time off may have slowed her efforts to win voters. She missed a September California Republican Party convention, and an October survey by the Field Poll found GOP voters more cautious about her candidacy.

A month later, she declared at her campaign launch that "breast cancer is officially behind me."

"From Carly's perspective, part of who she is to be open and transparent about that experience," said Fiorina spokeswoman Julie Soderlund.

Candidates have disclosed more about their health in recent decades, particularly in an age when information spreads through various new forms of media, said Bill Carrick, a veteran Democratic political consultant.

"People used to hide their medical conditions, but it's not possible now," Carrick said.

Yet some candidates and officeholders, particularly older ones, have been sensitive about their health conditions. Former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan did not disclose he had prostate cancer and underwent 44 days of radiation treatment while he was in office, revealing it only in preparation for his 2002 gubernatorial run.

Jessica Grounds, a Washington, D.C., campaign consultant and president of the Women Under Forty PAC, said female politicians are including their personal lives as a greater part of their political messages.

"It makes you real when you've battled this disease, and it's a powerful experience," Grounds said of Fiorina. "It's a new norm to talk about personal experiences because it connects you to reality that people suffer from these diseases, and maybe it's something she wants to take up as an issue as she runs for the seat. She strategically decided to talk about it in an upfront way."

Fiorina has joined other Republicans in linking the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force's mammogram recommendations to the health care overhaul under debate, suggesting that both are paths toward rationing care to save money.

"I think it causes people to say, 'whoa, is this what government-run health care is about, is this what rationing health care is about?'" Fiorina told CNN last week.

The task force recommended that most women in their 40s don't need regular mammograms, while those older should get them every other year rather than on an annual basis. Task force members have said they based their findings on scientific evidence, not cost, according to the New York Times.

Boxer is also opposed to the new guidelines and has signed a joint letter urging the Senate to hold a hearing to examine the new recommendations, according to Rose Kapolczynski, Boxer's campaign manager. Kapolczynski took issue with Fiorina's linkage to the health care debate, however.

"These recommendations did not come out of health care reform," Kapolczynski said. "Fiorina opposes health care reform and the benefits they would bring to Californians. I think she's using the outrage over these screening recommendations to bolster her case, but it just doesn't make sense."

Joshua Traviño, a spokesman for Assemblyman Chuck DeVore of Irvine, Fiorina's primary opponent, said Fiorina hasn't taken a tough enough stand against the health care plan because she says she agrees with the goals of health care reform, although not the current proposal.

"As a recent breast-cancer survivor, Carly Fiorina is well placed to speak on this, and it's to be hoped she will use the bully pulpit to advocate the principles Chuck DeVore has spent his entire public career advancing: less government control, and more individual autonomy in making sound decisions," Traviño said.