

# SORRY, YOU HAVE AN ILLNESS NOT ENDORSED

## BY A CELEBRITY

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Sorry, you have an illness not endorsed by a celebrity. When Oprah revealed last month that she has been struggling with a thyroid disorder, New York Times health columnist Tara Parker-Pope wrote, "The ultimate celebrity endorsement from Oprah Winfrey may finally give thyroid problems the respect they deserve." Yes, and thousands of patients being treated for an underactive thyroid gland could finally breathe a sigh of relief. Hypothyroidism had been elevated to legitimate disease status. It wasn't all in their heads.

Physicians like me rejoiced as well, knowing that one of the hardest things we have to do is tell a patient that he or she has an NCEI, that is, a non-celebrity-endorsed illness. Not only have they come down with, say, membranous nephritis or celiac disease—now they have to deal with the very lonely fact that nobody of any significant public stature has contracted said illness. They're going to have to go it alone.

Now, don't get me wrong. There certainly is an altruistic aspect to celebrities going public with their medical problems. They don't want others to go through what they have. They want to raise awareness and promote research into the illness. Their privacy may be the only thing they can really call their own, so good for them for giving up some of it. Excuse the ingratitude - it's not exactly that - but media coverage of celebrity illnesses often puts a kink in my stethoscope. There's always this odd sense that breast cancer, for example, didn't exist until some supermodel found a lump in her breast. What a ruthless bastard this breast cancer is, invading a sculpted, perfectly adorned cover girl breast! It reminds me of the time straight-line winds bulldozed hundreds of trees in my part of St. Paul. A dozen cars got crushed in the process, but the TV cameras were clustered around a Jaguar, whose flattened form demonstrated what a godless menace this storm really was. A fury so violent it was impartial to sticker price.

From the information Oprah has given, she appears to have chronic autoimmune thyroiditis, the most common cause of hypothyroidism in the U.S. I'm sorry for her. I don't wish disease on anyone, be they famous, infamous or anonymous. Fortunately, hypothyroidism is easily treatable. There won't be any "Hypothyroidism Survivor" pins. But celebrity disease endorsements get out of hand when they focus more on the diseased than the disease, or when they portray the suffering of a celebrity as something extraordinary. The regular people I treat just have regular illnesses and regular pain. They don't cry in Dolby Surround Sound, they don't bleed in Technicolor. They get crayon drawings from their grandchildren, not sacks of fan mail. They haul their weakened bodies back and forth to clinic appointments, not to media interviews. They struggle with all this knowing they will never appear on "Chemotherapy with the Stars,"

and they get by with a fraction of the resources and support available to the Bold and the Beautiful.

A few years ago I took care of a young man who showed up with widespread testicular cancer. He was married, had two young children and worked construction. He went through all the ugliness: struggled through chemotherapy, surgery, recurrent disease. With no Tour de France victory to lean on, he stuck it out with his kids and his wife. Sheryl Crow never entered the picture. He never wrote a book. The most heroic struggles often go untelevised.