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Why voters need to know about the health of would-be presidents



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BY WILLIAM DOUGLAS AND LESLEY CLARK

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WASHINGTON — When it comes to the 2016 presidential race, health matters.

While Hillary Clinton’s pneumonia likely isn’t as serious or life-threatening as some of the maladies that afflicted candidates and past presidents, many political observers and presidential experts think that she and Donald Trump have an obligation to be more transparent about their health.

It’s an age thing, they say.

Trump is 70 and Clinton is 68, and voters need to know whether there are any health problems that could prevent them from performing in an extremely stressful job that requires “extremely good energy and stamina to handle the complex issues,” according to Ludwig Deppisch, an author and retired pathologist.

“It’s not only taxing on the mind, but the body,” said Deppisch, the author of “The White House Physician: A History From Washington to George W. Bush” and “The Health of the First Ladies: Medical Histories From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama.” “People are being asked to determine which candidate is better able to fulfill the responsibilities of the presidency and need the information.”

Yet presidential candidates and presidents have been loath to fully divulge their health history – unless they almost have no choice.

In 2008, then-presidential candidate Barack Obama, then 47, released a 276-word summary about his health without providing medical records. Meanwhile, Sen. John McCain, the Republican presidential nominee, made available nearly 1,200 pages of medical documents to ease concerns about the then-72-year-old becoming the oldest first-term president.

David Scheiner, who was Obama’s physician and wrote the 2008 health summary, penned an opinion/editorial piece in Sunday’s Washington Post outlining why it’s important for Clinton and Trump to release their medical histories because of their ages.

“At these ages, stuff begins to happens,” Scheiner wrote.

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Robert Gilbert, author of ‘The Mortal Presidency: Illness and Anguish in the White House’

Robert Streiffer, a professor of philosophy at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, who co-authored a 2006 article in the Journal of Medicine and Philosophy, said candidates had a duty to disclose certain conditions.

“Anything that has a significant or realistic chance of affecting a candidate’s ability to carry out the core functions of the presidency should be disclosed,” he said.

More health details about Clinton and Trump are coming this week.

Trump said Monday that he'd provide medical records this week beyond the four-paragraph statement last year from his doctor, who proclaimed that he would be "the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency."

Trump is also scheduled to talk health Thursday on "The Dr. Oz Show," a nationally syndicated television show. Clinton campaign officials said she would release additional medical records this week.

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WE SHOULD FORMALIZE THIS DISCUSSION, BUT NOT IN THE HEAT OF A CONTROVERSY

Robert Streiffer, co-author of article calling for candidates to disclose health records

Several presidents and presidential candidates weren't always forthcoming about their health.

The American public didn't know the full extent of President Franklin Roosevelt's polio condition and overall health, President John F. Kennedy hid that he suffered from Addison's disease and the country didn't know how incapacitated President Woodrow Wilson was following a stroke.

On the campaign trail, former Sen. Paul Tsongas proclaimed himself cancer-free when he ran for president in 1992. But he admitted after winning the New York primary that year that he had been treated in 1987 for a recurrence of lymphoma. Tsongas, who said he'd erred in not disclosing his treatment, died in 1997 at the age of 55.

Then-Sen. George McGovern's 1972 Democratic presidential campaign derailed when it was revealed that his running mate, Sen. Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, had been hospitalized for depression and underwent electroshock therapy.

Eagleton did not disclose his ailment and hospitalization to the McGovern campaign during the vice-presidential vetting process. He then withdrew from the ticket. Incumbent President Richard Nixon won re-election in a landslide, carrying all but Massachusetts and Washington, D.C.

"Complete disclosure is asking too much; no disclosure is also asking too much," said Robert Gilbert, the author of "The Mortal Presidency: Illness and Anguish in the White House." "You really have to be careful."



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Hillary Clinton's weekend on the campaign trail trumped her opponent's weekend. Her campaign said she left the 9/11 anniversary ceremony in New York early after feeling "overheated."

Natalie Fertig - McClatchy

Some medical information isn't relevant, such as illnesses and injuries that occurred decades earlier and pose no current problems, Streiffer said.

He argues that medical histories such as sexually transmitted diseases or abortion – which could influence voters but not affect job performance – should not be disclosed.

“You would want to limit the information to conditions that any reasonable person would think could affect one's job,” he said. “A serious physical or mental condition that would get in the way.”

Presidential candidates have “legitimate privacy interests” because health can be complicated and “if everything is disclosed, it's hard to know what matters,” he added.

Still, Streiffer would like to see a general agreement that candidates release health information, similar to the way that most White House aspirants release their income tax returns. Trump has not released his tax returns, while Republican vice-presidential candidate Mike Pence, Clinton and her running mate, Tim Kaine, have.

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