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The National Institutes of Health: A Singular Bipartisan Mission

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Commentary Overview

- Sustained support for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is a rare example of bipartisan agreement in Washington.
- Continued federal support of science in academia will unleash cancer treatments and potential cures that are currently in development, as well as those remaining to be discovered.
- Decades of funding from NIH has positioned the United States as the global leader in discovery science while supporting jobs and economic growth domestically.
- To inspire the next generation of young scholars to pursue scientific research, and to guarantee ongoing progress against cancer and other diseases, collective political support for the NIH must move forward.

As Washington, DC, experiences the second Trump administration, it can be difficult to find issues on which there is strong bipartisan agreement. Yet sustained commitment to funding the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is certainly one that has stood the test of time.

Founded in 1887, the NIH has been famously called the crown jewel of the federal government by the late U.S. Senator Arlen Specter. Its annual budget of nearly \$48 billion is devoted to supporting innovative research into America's most deadly diseases. Stories of success are numerous.

Consider cancer, the field where I have spent my professional career. When the National Cancer Program was created in 1971, cancer was a death sentence and cancer centers designated by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) were just convalescent homes where well-meaning physicians and nurses made patients comfortable.

More than 50 years later, in the United States, we have a growing population, approaching 20 million individuals, called cancer survivors who have managed to overcome their disease, go on to lead productive lives, and contribute to the gross domestic product.

The discovery of the Philadelphia Chromosome at Fox Chase Cancer Center led to drugs like Gleevec and Herceptin, which changed the face of leukemia and breast cancer, respectively. The fruits of basic science discoveries over the last two decades have enabled “silver bullets” for precision medicine treatment of patients with different cancers.

Yet for all our accomplishments, we are hardly done. Cancer is incredibly complex, involving the interplay of biological, environmental, and social factors that must be understood and overcome. This requires numerous disciplines working together.

Drug Discovery Case Study

A Three-Decade Journey with Federal Support

In my own lab at Brown University’s Legorreta Cancer Center, scientists are working to understand how a drug class we discovered, and that is currently in clinical trials, works to shrink aggressive brain cancer and other tumors. This drug that was originally discovered in my lab in 2007 as a TRAIL-Inducing Compound (TIC10) and later named ONC201, dordaviprone, and most recently modeyso, received U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval for aggressive brain cancer on August 6, 2025.

This was the first approval of a targeted therapy for H3 K27M-mutated diffuse gliomas, a disease that has a poor prognosis and is not amenable to resection due to location in the middle of the brain and as a type of brain tumor that doesn’t respond to temozolomide when combined with radiation. We got here by discovering how cancer cells are killed through a cell death mechanism. This example of impactful research brings hope for boosting our innate immune system to fight cancer and reduce the toxicities of other cancer treatments like radiation.

This personal laboratory journey from basic science discovery of TRAIL Death Receptor 5 in 1995 with publication in 1997, to founding a startup called Oncoceutics two decades ago, to discovering TIC10/ONC201 in 2007 to its ultimate FDA approval in 2025 has taken three decades. It is a prime example of NIH/NCI-supported science in academia that translates to patient benefit and public good. There are other cancer treatments or potential cures lurking within the halls and laboratories of academia that need to be unleashed with US government support of biomedical research.

Global Leadership and the Engine for Progress

America’s scientific, societal, and global impact on cancer and other diseases since World War II has translated to global leadership in science, technology and medicine. The precious ecosystem, including NIH/NCI as crown jewels, that supports academic basic and translational research with government support is unique, irreplaceable, and must be preserved and nurtured to extend its positive impact on humanity’s biggest diseases and afflictions.

Discovery science is the engine for progress to bring interventions to the clinic and general population. Innovation and entrepreneurship are key. There is much work ahead with drugs and drug combinations to individualize cancer treatments. This is the promise of precision oncology that is the future of oncology writ large. Preventing cancer from developing in the first place must remain a goal. Keeping our population healthy and cancer-free is the most cost-effective approach to reducing the cancer burden in the US and worldwide.

It’s not just scientists with doctoral degrees who are working on medical breakthroughs. Labs employ individuals at every educational and skill level, with the ancillary effects of scientific discovery leading to measurable and well-documented economic growth. An economic impact study found that every dollar invested in the NIH generates \$2.46 of economic activity, with

impact in every state. Collaboration between physicians and scientists helps bring the latest discoveries to patients. Commercialization of discoveries creates jobs through startups that spur the economy.

Inspiring the Next Generation

That sort of growth inspires young people of every color and creed to pursue science as their career. In my own lab we have scientists and physicians at different professional levels from high school, college, medical and graduate school, post-doctoral trainees to early-stage faculty. They come from all over the world, collaborating and exchanging skills, backgrounds, and knowledge to make a difference. They are pushing the frontiers of knowledge, and I am inspired by their stories to do more through our vibrant, diverse cancer research and oncology communities.

For all the research we've done on rates of cancer and other diseases, there is no indication that Republicans get cancer at higher rates than Democrats, or that Democrats get heart disease at higher rates than Republicans. We can and we must move forward, in a bipartisan fashion, to preserve funding for the NIH. Our future depends on it.

Our Mission

The Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI) represents over 100 premier academic and freestanding cancer centers in the United States and Canada. AACI is accelerating progress against cancer by enhancing the impact of academic cancer centers and promoting cancer health equity.

About AACI Commentary

To promote the work of its members, AACI publishes *Commentary*, a monthly editorial series focusing on major issues of common interest to North American cancer centers, authored by cancer center leaders and subject matter experts.

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