



Association of American Cancer Institutes COMMENTARY

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Norman E. Sharpless, MD, is director of the National Cancer Institute

(photo credit: National Cancer Institute, Darr Beiser)

Perspectives from the New NCI Director

BY NORMAN E. SHARPLESS, MD

I'm very honored and humbled to be the new director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI), but many of you in the AACI community have known me as a former AACI board member and director of the UNC Lineberger Cancer Center, jobs I tremendously enjoyed.

In the short time I've been at NCI, I've been doing a great deal of listening and learning. I believe that getting advice from leaders in the field such as the AACI members should be an important component of my role—not just initially, but throughout my time as director. I know firsthand the priorities and challenges of running a cancer center, but I plan to keep our dialogue ongoing so that NCI can work with you to mitigate these challenges and support you to do the best science.

Commentary Overview

* NCI is committed to fostering an environment for cancer center directors that is focused on scientific leadership and strategic thinking.

* NCI strives to facilitate innovative clinical trials that are adequately powered and well-designed.

* NCI has continued to increase the amount of funds for Research Project Grants over the years to support basic research at

I know funding is always top of mind for those of us in the research community. All of us would, of course, like to see a system of predictability for NIH/NCI funding; unpredictable funding makes it a challenge to forecast science and plan out-year budget commitments. I still remember very clearly the trepidation I felt when I was a young physician considering transitioning to a research career. The idea of relying on the vagaries of peer review and the ebb and flow of grants was worrisome. Thankfully, great mentors convinced me that a career in research would be very rewarding, and worth the risk. I am sure many AACI members have found themselves providing similar advice to the junior scientists in their centers over the last several years.

I believe that good science and persistence will propel cancer centers and their investigators to success in our current system. That's not to

cancer centers.

About AACI Commentary

As part of AACI's efforts to feature the work and views of its member centers, AACI publishes *AACI Commentary*, a quarterly editorial series. Written by cancer center leaders, each edition focuses on a major issue of common interest to AACI cancer centers.



say I won't be looking for ways to make the system better and easier to navigate. I know that the NCI Cancer Center Support Grant (CCSG), which brings critical support for research discoveries to patients throughout the nation, can be administratively burdensome. Given the influx of new cancer center directors in the last year, I worry that the turnover may be due, in part, to frustrations related to hassles with the CCSG mechanism. When directors bow out early, we lose continuity, experience, and tremendous talent. Our goal at NCI will be to make sure that being a cancer center director remains a wonderful and enriching position, with time for scientific leadership and strategic thinking.


On the other hand, the arrival of 26 new directors was bound to happen, if only for demographic reasons alone. Several cancer center directors had been in their roles for 20 or more years, and the shift to young directors who come with fresh energy and ideas is a change we should welcome.

The operational challenges for cancer centers around clinical trials will be another area that I will look at more closely. AACI has been a leader in identifying problems and best practices in the clinical trials enterprise through its Clinical Research Initiative. NCI is committed to facilitating innovative clinical trials that are adequately powered and well-designed, and allow patients to be enrolled in regardless of cost to advance patient care.

NCI's Cancer Centers Program is one of the anchors of the nation's cancer research effort and we hope to expand the number of cancer centers across the country, as resources allow. NCI has continued to increase the amount of funds for Research Project Grants over the years to support the large number of basic scientists at cancer centers and facilitate research. Cancer centers are very nurturing places for young investigators to work, offering an outstanding research environment with protected time, designated space, great colleagues, and an infrastructure that provides excellent resources and access to a wide range of cores to support their cancer research.

I envision AACI playing a key role in raising awareness across cancer centers and encouraging investigators to apply for Cancer Moonshot research funding opportunities. I intend to make good on the promise of the Cancer Moonshot's vision and fully enact the Blue Ribbon Panel's recommendations as initially conceived. With implementation teams working steadily across all the recommendations, the Cancer Moonshot has been off to a great start. There are currently 30 funding opportunities announcements aligned with this initiative.

While we can never know the future, it's clear that the year ahead is going to be challenging in terms of what we can do and what we must do. But, like AACI and its member centers, NCI is up for that challenge and I look forward to working together with all of you to forge a

productive path forward. 

Representing 97 of North America's premier academic and free-standing cancer centers, the Association of American Cancer Institutes is dedicated to reducing the burden of cancer by enhancing the impact of leading cancer centers.
