

NIH Funding: A Sustained Investment in a Healthy Future



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As we think about the substantial challenges facing our health care system today, we sometimes forget about the progress we have made. Over the last 30 years, deaths from heart disease have declined by 50 percent, and deaths from stroke by more than 60 percent. And while four of five children with leukemia once died, today four out of five survive. This progress would not have been possible

without the medical research conducted at the nation's medical schools and teaching hospitals through the support and funding of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The NIH is the primary federal agency responsible for conducting and supporting medical research. In just the last decade, NIH-funded advances have led to new, targeted therapies to treat cancer, a test to predict breast cancer recurrence, identification of genetic markers for mental illness and many other diseases, improved asthma treatments, and the near-elimination of mother-to-child HIV transmission. In addition, important new treatments for leukemia, clot-busting drugs to treat stroke, and stents for heart disease were all based on NIH-funded research.

As we look to the future, we must remember that the investment we make in medical research is critical to our nation's economic

health, as well as our physical health. The research conducted today not only represents our best hope for new cures and treatments, it also will make us a healthier and more productive society.

The past few weeks have given the medical research community renewed hope. After five years of NIH funding that failed to keep pace with biomedical inflation, the economic recovery package included \$10.4 billion over two years for the NIH. The 2009 appropriations bill also included an increase of nearly \$1 billion.

While we are encouraged by – and grateful for – this substantial infusion of funds, there is still a long way to go. In FY 2008, only one in five research proposals submitted to NIH could be funded, and there was a backlog of more than 10,000 scientifically approved grants waiting for support. These are the projects that will produce a deeper understanding

of the molecular basis of disease and disability, as well as new and more effective treatments, and possibly even cures, for cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, and autism, among others.

History has shown us that “boom and bust” cycles of support for research funding have resulted in lost opportunities for science and delayed hope for patients and their families. The recent increase in support for NIH cannot be an isolated event. Rather, it must be a first step toward a renewed national commitment to sustained, real growth in NIH funding over the long term.

It is also important to keep in mind that medical research has immediate benefits. NIH research supports our economic health today by creating skilled jobs and new products that generate economic growth. According to a Families USA study, NIH funding is responsible for over 350,000 jobs with an average salary of \$52,000,

well above the national average. This study also showed that every dollar of NIH funding generated more than two dollars in state economic output in 2007.

One of the other major strengths of the nation's medical research enterprise is that much of the work takes place in medical schools and teaching hospitals where the next generation of physicians is educated and trained and cutting-edge medical care is delivered. It is through these individuals and institutions that medical research will transform health care as we know it.

But reaping the full benefits of scientific discoveries takes decades. By restricting funding now, we will undermine medical progress for generations to come.

As we plan for 2010 and beyond, and consider our “post stimulus” budgetary needs, significant, annual increases in medical research funding are critical.

Our national spending priorities must offer a solid

return on the investment of our tax dollars as our nation works toward economic recovery. Sustained, real growth in the NIH budget will benefit our nation's fiscal as well as physical health and is one of the most effective investments we can make in our future. And for the millions of Americans who still – or will – suffer from cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, depression, diabetes, asthma, and other serious illnesses, medical research is their best hope for a healthy future.

