

Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education

Hearing on Saving Lives Through Medical Research

Statements in Support of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) Funding

March 8, 2017

Sen. Roy Blunt (R-Mo.)

“In the next few years, as we continue to confront difficult spending choices, we really have to continue, in my view, to firmly establish our federal commitment to the National Institute of Health. Since its founding, the NIH has funded research to raise life expectancy, to lower health care costs, and to improve the quality of life for all Americans.

In the 80 years since Congress established the National Cancer Institute, we've gone from really crude treatments with grim prognosis, have -- to a place where we know much more about what we're dealing with and how to deal with it, and we're going to hear today some future projections of how that even advances in a more dramatic way.

Since the 1940s, the rates of cardiovascular deaths have dropped 60 percent, thanks to effective treatments, a lot of which involved NIH funded research. These are really two great examples, both in cancer and cardiovascular disease of what happens when you have the kinds of medical breakthroughs that we've seen and I think can see in even greater numbers.

In the past year, NIH funded the development of an artificial pancreas that would be life-changing if you have type 1 diabetes. They've discovered biomarkers that were unique to two different prostate cancer stages and decoded the structure of the Zika virus. We need to remember that this progress didn't occur on its own. It happened because of generation of researchers funded largely by U.S. government through the NIH tirelessly work to discover science that led to these treatments and cures.

Federal funding was an essential component of that progress and has advanced the understanding of disease, raised life expectancy and improved quality of life for patients and their families.

Last year, for the first time in over a decade, the labor HHS Appropriations Bill significantly increased funding for NIH. This \$2 billion increase allowed the NIH to fund 1,000 -- 1,147 more grants nationwide than they would have funded otherwise. Funding for NIH research in my home state is increased by \$37.4 million or eight percent as we saw just about that same size increase in overall NIH funding.

Consistent sustained increases in funding are critical for biomedical researchers as they undertake the complex multiyear studies necessary to pursue new treatments. It's also a consistent -- they're also essential if we're going to encourage young researchers and we're going to hear some about that today as well to really believe that they can and will be able to make a real difference in research.

By the way, a pattern has to first happen in the second year. And I want to thank Senator Murray for her support and leadership as we, again, in the bill that still pending before the Congress at work, to add another \$2 billion to the of basic research funding at NIH. Fiscal year 2016 funding increase cannot and should not be seen as a one-time thing or even toward some goal that's anywhere short of funding research as long as there's research that is promising to be funded.

We do know that the scientific advances will be made in the next 10 years can make a real difference in people's lives and make a real difference in overall health care costs. It will make a real difference in taxpayer-funded health care cost. And we need to be committed in that regard. And certainly, Senator Murray has been and we've been able to work together on this.”

Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.)

“The investments that we do make in the subcommittee help keep families and communities healthy by supporting programs that reduce infant mortality, train our doctors and nurses, provide care in rural communities and prevent the spread of infectious diseases and so much more.

The NIH accounts for the largest share of our subcommittees resource and its work is vital to all those efforts. The basic research it supports leads to the discoveries and breakthroughs that give hope to those living with chronic and life-threatening disease and bolster economic growth and competitiveness.

Today, NIH researchers are taking advantage of the achievements made in human genetics, imaging technology, and other fields to advance our understanding of diseases like cancer and Alzheimer's. Its precision medicine initiative is using the genetics of cancer to find effective therapies while its brain initiative is revolutionizing our understanding of the human brain.

We are on the cusp of major breakthroughs for so many illnesses that cost lives and hurt families each day. But now, there are efforts that actually would put millions of Americans access to these advanced treatments at risk and there is a very real threat to this committee's ability to fund future increases in NIH to sustain its research efforts.”

“I am also concerned by the details of the president's budget that the administration recently chose to make public. Cutting non-defense spending by \$54 billion would require devastating cuts to the education, health and training programs that this subcommittee funds and I don't see how NIH, which accounts for 20 percent of the funding in the bill, will avoid being affected.

I know members on both sides of the aisle here agree on the importance of medical research. So, this is not a partisan issue. Just last December, Democrats and Republicans were able to come together to establish a new \$4.8 billion funding stream for NIH, and I want to thank the chairman for his focus on the -- in the Cures Act to help accelerate medical research efforts. That was an important step forward as well as the bipartisan spending bill that this subcommittee wrote last spring that would provide additional funding for NIH and other priorities in 2017.

Unfortunately, we now know the fate of that spending bill is uncertain. Patients and families across the country are waiting. They're hoping for better cures and treatments, as well as for help with the other challenges they face, whether it is quality childcare or paying for college or getting care when they're sick. And here in Congress, I hope we can do our part to deliver.”

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.)

“I think the medical researchers are one of the most vital things in our country. We have eminent scholars speaking here. I also mentioned in University of Vermont, medical research (inaudible) opportunities are critical and know it because of the research we do to have, but the -- give away the tracks there and this commitment of what we've done in this subcommittee resulted in billions of dollars increase for NIH over the past few fiscal years and -- including the billions promised over the past 21st Century Cures Bill.

But I worry when we say, "Well, we got to take money for things -- \$25 billion for a wall on the Mexican border, which has to come from somewhere in here, a huge increase in defense spending. I would urge all senators, you can't hit a pause button on research. Dr. Grabowski, you talked about Alzheimer's. You can't say, "Well, stop the research for a few years and come back to it," just as you can't in cancer or any other - any other areas.

And so, I think in the Appropriations Committee, we can talk about our national priorities frankly. I think the big national priority is medical research. There is no family who doesn't know somebody or have a member of their family who has suffered from cancer, heart conditions, diabetes, even Alzheimer's, and I can't imagine any American who thinks that we should cut back on research as they might say in the most powerful and wealthiest nation on earth, why aren't we doing more?"

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.)

"This Congress has been slow in finding things on which we can agree, but one thing we do agree on, as has been said, is the importance of biomedical research and many of those who have led that fight are here and will continue to do it I think especially of the work that Senator Blunt and Senator Murray did with the subcommittee.

My hope is that we can approve the appropriation soon for the current year, which will give us two straight years in the -- in the subcommittee and the work that Senator Murray did with me and others on the Cares Bill. We have a commitment there for future funding.

And of course, Senator Durbin and Senator Cochran, Senator Moran have been at the forefront of that all along. So, we'll continue to do that. I think it's important for those working in the community to notice it that when we talk about \$2 billion increase in one year that's really \$20 billion over 10 years. And when we talk about another \$2 billion in the second year, that's really \$20 more billion over 10 years. And we talked about \$4.8 billion in the Cures Bill, that's on top of that. So, these are beginning to be significant dollars."

Sen. Jerry Moran (R-Kan.)

"I'm interested in the number of people who have applauded Senator Blunt and Senator Murray in their efforts as well as the senator from Tennessee and I certainly join in that. I also note how many times my colleagues have talked about how this is a bipartisan effort. That's certainly true.

What is discouraging is that this is such an example of that. We highlight it because we're proud of it. It's been successful. It makes a difference, but we do that because it's the exception. And if we like what we're doing in medical research in the bipartisan effort that we've engendered in order to accomplish that, let's try it elsewhere and it might be just as enjoyable and invoke additional pride in other aspects of what we do in Washington, D.C.

I also wanted to follow up on the appropriations process. We're pleased with what we've been able to do in the past appropriation bill in this subcommittee and the full appropriations committee with Chairman Cochran's leadership in regard to NIH and research dollars. What that -- that's a Pyrrhic victory if we don't do the appropriation bill. And if we end up with another continuing resolution for 2017, all the things that we bragged about as successes will be failures.

And my hope and I have spoken about this on the Senate floor and talk to my colleagues and hope that there is a growing recognition that we have an opportunity to do something this year. In the next few weeks, we expected defense appropriations bill to come from the House -- coming from the House to the Senate.

We have passed MILCON-VA for F.Y. 2017. We will presumably pass a defense appropriation bill for F.Y. 2017, but we need to take the next step and add the other 10 appropriation bills in, including Labor-H, so that the pat on the back that we give ourselves and the accolades that this subcommittee receives in regard to NIH actually come to fruition.

And I would encourage Mr. Chairman, Chairman Cochran, I would work with you and Chairman Blunt as well as our Democratic colleagues to make sure we don't miss this opportunity for all 12 appropriation bills. The priorities that we've established particularly here in the Labor H bill actually become law, and then it sets the stage for us to do our jobs with your jobs with F.Y. 18.”