

Three Ways to Find More Disease Cures

BY MICHAEL MILKEN
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The triumph of science over disease in the past century is astounding. Since 1900, a host of maladies—diphtheria, measles, whooping cough, polio, tetanus, typhoid and smallpox, among others—have been mostly controlled. These victories helped more than double global life expectancy over the 20th century, according to the World Health Organization.

Medical research has also significantly reduced the burden of cancer and heart disease. Data from the National Cancer Institute show that the risk of dying from cancer decreased 22% between 1991 and 2011. By 2010, more than 80% of cancer-stricken children were surviving at least five years, up from about 50% in 1975. Heart disease and stroke deaths have also fallen dramatically.



Tens of millions of people are healthy today but would have been in their graves if not for these advances. I'm one of them. In 1993 I was diagnosed with advanced cancer and given less than 18 months to live. I'm alive because of medical breakthroughs spearheaded in the U.S.

Congress made some of these revolutionary improvements possible when it voted to triple the National Cancer Institute budget in 1998. The NIH budget also grew to \$27.1 billion in 2003, up from only \$14.6 billion in 1994. This has given millions of people more priceless time with loved ones. There's also an economic benefit. In real, inflation-adjusted terms, the per capita output of Americans today is about eight times what it was in the 19th century, the late British economist Angus Maddison estimated. As much as half of all economic growth since the 19th century is directly linked to progress against disease.

Yet out of more than 10,000 known disorders, the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences says that fewer than 1,000 have truly effective treatments. Without research breakthroughs, Alzheimer's disease could cost \$1.1 trillion a year for treatment and care by 2050, estimates the Alzheimer's Association. That's nearly twice the annual Defense Department budget.

Here are three actions that Congress and the new administration can take to speed up the discovery of cures.

1. *Share Department of Veterans Affairs data.* The nation's veterans have unique health needs and should always receive the best care available. The VA is already working to address past shortfalls. Another way to help is by expanding digitization of data on millions of current and former members of the U.S. military. Wider access to these data—with strong privacy safeguards

so patient identity is never disclosed—will help researchers to develop more effective therapies faster.

On Tuesday I am joining Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald, along with other public officials and private-industry leaders, in Washington to work on expanding cancer research and improving health-care outcomes for veterans. Our goal is to give every veteran access to treatments that are equal to or better than those available at top medical centers. This will be particularly valuable for African-Americans, whose cancer death rates are the highest of any group.

2. *Pass the Cures Act.* Last year the House of Representatives passed the 21st Century Cures Act with bipartisan support, 344-77. While Senate versions differ from the House bill, leaders of the two parties on both sides of the Capitol have expressed optimism that the variances can soon be resolved. That's important because the next Congress would have to start over again in January if a final bill isn't passed before the end of this session.

This landmark legislation will accelerate cures for many life-threatening diseases and help advance precision medicine, which is based on each individual's unique genome. It assures patient-focused drug development, adds rigor to clinical trials and expands compassionate use of new drugs by dying patients. The bill also includes language to speed the review of vaccines, address antibiotic resistance, respond to the opioid crisis and strengthen the nation's research infrastructure.

3. *Set a funding goal and stick to it.* A renewed commitment to biomedical research could save, extend or enhance millions of lives. Already strong bipartisan support for such a commitment recognizes that investment on the front end will lower Medicare and other costs later.

After climbing for several years, the NIH budget peaked in 2003. Inflation then eroded the agency's resources by some 25%. There was a one-year boost as part of the 2009 stimulus program, followed by another downward shift caused by inflation. Then another moderate increase came this year. How is a researcher supposed to pursue complex science while riding that roller coaster?

Young scientists, who must spend more than a decade in training, may lose confidence that meaningful opportunities will be available later in their careers. That's why many of the nearly 1,000 medical-research leaders who participated in the Milken Institute's recent Partnering for Cures conference told me that consistency of funding is as important as the funding itself.

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These are among the most important challenges President-elect Trump and Congress must confront as growing numbers of Americans deal with the health issues of aging. Many of us in the private economy stand ready to partner with the new leadership in Washington to advance the nation's health.

Mr. Milken is chairman of the Milken Institute, a think tank dedicated to widening access to capital, creating jobs and improving health.