

August 10th, 2020

Norman E. Sharpless, MD
Director
National Cancer Institute

Dear Director Sharpless,

We, the undersigned organizations, thank you for your support of early career cancer researchers at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI). In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, we join with others in asking that early career support continue over the coming years by ensuring that the grant success rate for early career investigators increases or remains consistent, grant application deadlines remain flexible, and that preliminary data requirements for early career grant applications is lessened given the halt and subsequent restart of current research programs.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, early career scientists were among the most vulnerable within the research community. Early career individuals have exceedingly high expectations placed upon them, including long-term commitments to training and education, followed by extreme pressure to secure research funding while balancing academic or practice-related duties. This is exemplified by the increase in average age, from 36 in 1980 to 45 in 2016, for first-time MD-PhD Investigators receiving an initial R01-equivalent grant^{*1}.

Unfortunately, the current COVID-19 pandemic threatens to further diminish the ability of early career individuals to secure research funding. We commend the NIH for recognizing the current challenges that early career researchers are facing, and already taking steps to extend certain grant applications, as well as prioritizing continual increases in first-time success rate since 2013^{*2}. We strongly encourage NIH and NCI to consider three primary aspects in order to continue support of early career investigators both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 1) Ensure that appropriated federal dollars, through either COVID-19 related stimulus or the annual budget, will continue to be prioritized for first-time investigators over the coming years in an effort to maintain or increase current success rates for first-time grant applications
- 2) Continue to extend or provide additional grant application deadlines for added flexibility as investigators restart their research programs
- 3) Relax traditional productivity metrics for grant considerations, recognizing that lost time due to the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in diminished ability to carry out experiments as well as publish novel research

We appreciate that the NIH and NCI recognize that consistent early career research support is imperative for not only their development, but also the long-term health of the field of oncology. We believe that oncology research, much of which focuses on basic immunology, can also provide crosscutting impact across a variety of other diseases, including COVID-19. If early career researchers are unable to continue their development, dramatic effects upon the American research pipeline will reduce the rate of future disease treatments entering the clinic capable of saving lives. As such, we find it abundantly clear that the ripple effects of neglecting early career scientists during and after the COVID-19 pandemic would be felt well into the future.

We appreciate your longstanding support of the scientific research community, and thank you for considering the needs early career scientists.

Sincerely on behalf of the undersigned organizations,

Society for Immunotherapy of Cancer (SITC)
Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI)
American Society of Hematology (ASH)
American Urological Association (AUA)

American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO)
American Association for Cancer Research (AACR)
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS-CAN)
Kidney Cancer Coalition (KidneyCAN)

^{*1} – *National Institute of Health*

https://grants.nih.gov/grants/new_investigators/Age_Degree-First-Time-117-16_RFM_11s_25march2016_DR-Approved.xlsx

^{*2} – *National Institute of Health*

<https://report.nih.gov/nihdatabook/category/15>