

August 10th, 2020

Rachel B. Ramoni, DMD, ScD
Chief Research and Development Officer
Department of Veterans Affairs

Dear Dr. Ramoni,

We, the undersigned organizations, thank you for your support of early career cancer researchers at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). In light of the current COVID-19 pandemic, we join with others in asking you to broaden support for early career individuals by ensuring that the grant success rate for early career investigators increases or remains consistent, allow for flexibility in grant application deadlines, and consider a reduction in preliminary data requirements for early career grant applications.

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. Consistent early career research support is imperative for not only their development, but also the long-term health of the field of oncology. As such, we encourage the VA 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 in an effort to maintain or increase current success rates for first-time grant applications
- 2) 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

An entire generation of cancer researchers is facing an unprecedented situation and will require support from funding agencies. 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>