National Cancer Institute (NCI)

Optimal Timing and Sequencing of Cancer Immunotherapy.—The Committee recognizes that cancer immunotherapy is improving outcomes for an increasing number of cancer patients, especially those for whom other treatments were ineffective. New research suggests that more patients might benefit if immunotherapy were used earlier in the course of their cancer, or to prevent and intercept cancers before they start. Therefore, the Committee urges NCI to prioritize research focused on assessing the optimal timing for the use of cancer immunotherapy in individual patients. Examples of such research include studying the effectiveness of cancer immunotherapy in premalignant conditions, early-stage cancer, and as a neoadjuvant therapy, prior to additional treatment such as surgery, radiation or chemotherapy.

Background

Cancer immunotherapy—the practice of harnessing one’s own immune system to identify and destroy cancer—has revolutionized the field of oncology. Immunotherapy is now routinely used to treat many forms of cancer, and some patients have reported complete and durable responses. However, this approach does not currently work for every patient or for every form of cancer. New research suggests that administering immunotherapy earlier in the course of an individual’s disease may lead to better outcomes for a larger number of patients. Continued support from both the NCI and FDA is critical to this effort.

- NCI should fund research on the effectiveness of immunotherapy against tumors that are very early in development and thus potentially more curable. Other research could examine the use of immunotherapy prior to other treatment options such as chemotherapy or surgery.