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Letter to the Editor

Re: Sam Loewenberg's article, "Cancer policy in the Obama administration"

To the Editors:

In order to make progress in cancer research in the coming years, it's important first to understand the greatest hurdles standing in the way of federal funding for cancer research. From a patient's perspective, the media, for one thing, does a very poor job of educating and serving the public about cancer issues. The media tends to cover cancer when it strikes a celebrity. The problem is that the coverage is all human interest, and sometimes assumes the character of a death watch. I heard a cable news anchor, who lost a sister-in-law to breast cancer, explains how her producers almost never wanted to do stories related to cancer unless a celebrity was involved. Thus, TV, radio, newspapers, and blogs all fail to focus on substantive issues in cancer research including the lack of funding for research, the dilemmas of making decisions after a diagnosis, new frontiers in cancer science, and so on.

Another barrier is that politicians don't want to be associated with a failed war against an intractable disease. The wars on poverty, drugs and illegal immigration have all been largely discredited as ineffectual. President Johnson's Great Society program helped lower the poverty rate from 22% to 12% during the 1960s, but critics have successfully portrayed it as little more than a government handout program, which has had a chilling effect on similar campaigns. In the 1980s, First Lady Nancy Reagan's admonishment to America's youth to "just say no" to drugs became gist for late-night comedians.

At the same time, while cancer advocates do amazing work volunteering their time and pouring themselves into this life-and-death cause, generally speaking, cancer survivors, their families and the medical community break into sub-groups focused on individual types of cancer. This has been crucial in making strides for, say, breast cancer research. But my sense is that unlike the AIDS community, which created a major movement to fight the virus, the "cancer community" lacks a cohesive political movement. At a breast cancer symposium of the nation's top researchers, surgeons, activists, and drug makers, somebody said this was the first time they had all been in the same room. This was in October 2007.

There are other barriers to progress that make it more difficult to secure a reliable stream of federal funding for cancer research. At Hopkins, Dr. Anirban Maitra, a young, brilliant pancreatic cancer scientist, told me that he devotes insane amounts of time applying for every grant under the sun. His lab just doesn't have the resources it needs – it lacks the long-term financial stability – that is required to focus like a laser on his research. As a patient, that's really depressing. Another incredibly smart and creative scientist there, Dr. Scott Kern, said that the NIH – "the only large and renewable funding source for nearly all biomedical funding" – "rarely" funds research that "is truly novel and on the cutting edge" because the large review panels are unfamiliar with the proposed strategy and tend to fund projects that are "standard and well-defined" where "the risk is low and so may be the impact of the work." There is a "herd mentality" that undermines cancer research, and so a shift in outlook, approach, and culture is required in order to achieve breakthroughs.

The federal government spends billions to take humans into space and on building weapons – and an estimated \$60 billion on the U.S. intelligence budget. Relatively speaking, cancer research is a low priority. The paltry level of funding creates intolerable situations. A friend of mine is enrolled in a vaccine trial at MD Anderson led by Dr. Elizabeth Mittendorf designed to prevent a recurrence of breast cancer. But the trial is mostly dependent on private funding, so my friend is trying to raise tens of thousands of dollars on her own to keep the trial alive. That's just crazy, and it's wrong.

Cancer research is an issue that resonates profoundly, without regard to party affiliation. It frightens, maims and kills Democrats and Republicans alike. To cite just a few members of Congress who have cancer: Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) has brain cancer, and Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) has twice survived Hodgkin's disease. Sens. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.), Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) and Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.) share the distinction of having survived prostate cancer. In the House, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-Fla.) has undergone seven major surgeries in the past year because she not only had breast cancer but also has the BRCA-2 gene – putting

her at increased risk for developing ovarian and other cancers. Her colleagues Sue Myrick (R-N.C.) and Jim Marshall (D-Ga.) are also among the cancer survivors serving in the House.

Think back to the 2008 presidential campaign. John Edwards' wife Elizabeth announced that her breast cancer had spread to her bones. Obama's mother died from ovarian cancer at age 53. Former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani is a prostate cancer survivor, while John McCain and Fred Thompson successfully battled skin cancer and lymphoma, respectively. Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee's wife had spinal cancer when she was 19.

But American politicians don't always understand the connection between federal funding for cancer research and the impact it could have on their lives and people's lives in general. Advocates, doctors, and scientific investigators need to make elected officials aware of this connection. For when members of Congress and our president have a personal stake in something, they respond. After 9/11, there was a strong push to establish the Transportation Security Administration to provide federal protection at U.S. airports; members of Congress felt vulnerable because they fly commercial all the time. If they are reminded just how vulnerable they are to this disease, they will be more likely to respond favorably.

One popular refrain lawmakers in the U.S. have is that Issue X or Issue Y is not a partisan issue; it's an "American issue." When it comes to cancer research, it's actually true. Conservative Republicans like Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas, a melanoma survivor, strongly support cancer research. On the campaign trail in 2007, Brownback called cancer "the leading cause of fear in America today." In his February address to a joint session of Congress, President Obama talked about "seeking a cure for cancer in our time." His budget proposal includes doubling the funding for cancer research over five years.

Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike should rush to support that reasonable goal and all of the benefits that might flow from achieving it. On ideological grounds, liberal Democrats should unanimously show their support for a federal institute that conducts research, distributes grants and supports doctors whose clinical trials and laboratory research will save countless lives.

But Republicans should also be able to rally around the idea that the NCI isn't just a Big Government bureaucracy stifling economic innovation and the private enterprise system. On the contrary, NCI distributes grants to researchers employed at private medical institutions and leading hospitals. It makes the United States more competitive on a global scale in the

areas of science, medicine and cancer research. And it deepens a public-private partnership that, whatever its flaws, has led to innovation, strengthened the scientific marketplace of ideas and helped the American people live healthier lives.

I'm a visiting scholar at the Bipartisan Policy Center. BPC was founded by former Sen. Majority Leaders Dole, Daschle, Baker and Mitchell in 2007. It seeks to promote bipartisan policy solutions to energy, healthcare, and other national challenges, and some of my colleagues are working on a plan that Dole, Daschle and Howard Baker can all support to provide universal access to healthcare, which, of course, would save the lives of people with cancer. I believe that the issue of federal funding for cancer research is and must be a bipartisan issue that can win almost unanimous support from lawmakers.

In the end, a responsible national policy would make fighting the disease a policy priority because cancer causes far more deaths and anxiety in America than terrorism. A credible policy would call for a doubling of federal funding for cancer research with the twin goals of furthering basic research, as well as research on particular kinds of cancer. It would reverse the cuts to NCI's budget in recent years. If we are to see breakthroughs in cancer research in the coming years and decades, then these barriers to robust federal funding for cancer research must be made to fall.

Matthew Dallek, a visiting scholar at the Bipartisan Policy Center, is a cancer survivor. Portions of this letter were delivered as a speech to One Voice Against Cancer's National Lobby Day and originally appeared in *The American Scholar*, the award-winning magazine of the Phi Beta Kappa Society.

Matthew Dallek

University of California Washington Center, 1608 Rhode Island Ave,
NW, Washington, DC 20036, United States
E-mail address: matt_dallek@yahoo.com

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