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Kuriakose: Slashed medical research funding has put lives at risk

Philip Kuriakose The Detroit News

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Over the last few months, medical professionals have watched with profound concern as executive orders have frozen federal funding and issued deep cuts to medical research across America and in Michigan. As medical professionals, our commitment to medicine and the advancement of health care is deeply rooted in ensuring policies and funding decisions always support the ongoing needs of patients and providers.

In the past, physicians treated patients using chemotherapy and radiation regimens most of us would think twice about today. However, we have witnessed remarkable progress in diagnosing and treating patients with rare and hard to treat diseases and have watched as painstaking research helped us harness immune and circulatory systems to fight cancer cells while simultaneously developing designer drugs to safely and effectively destroy them. These innovations have seen patients enter facilities nationwide and walk out healed or on the path to recovery, having experienced care made possible by critical advancements and medical research. Today, many of these patients have been given a second chance to live a full life, exemplified by our neighbor who, while hugging her five-year-old through silent tears on his birthday, recalled her journey through cancer when he was barely a year old, wondering if she would ever see him enter kindergarten. These are miracles like no other.

Every day, our goal is to provide quality and compassionate care to every patient who walks through our doors, whether they live in a rural community, an urban center or receive treatment through a medical research institution. We lean heavily on current research and access to the best of medical technology to give each patient the care

they deserve and need. When these resources are cut and threatened, the tolls on people and on continued advancement become heavy.

As president of the Michigan Society of Hematology & Oncology (MSHO), I speak on behalf of my colleagues across the state when I say that all of us took an oath to provide the best and most equitable treatment to all patients. To stay true to upholding that commitment, we urge Congress to uphold their own oaths of service to the American people in the same manner.

By understanding the gravity of these cuts and funding freezes and by not choosing to uphold protection for medical research funding, specifically for the National Institute of Health (NIH), Congress is putting lives, livelihoods and American advancement at risk. The deep negative impacts we will see across Michigan will have far reaching implications for millions of Michigianians and Americans. This won't just impact a select group of individuals. The cuts will reach every household in the country, either by eliminating or severely reducing access to critical care and life-saving research for those in need of medical treatment.

As health care professionals, particularly as hematologists and oncologists, we come into the profession to keep people healthy and help them successfully navigate their difficult health care journey. Cancer is a particular threat that has seen incredible treatment advancements over the last 40-plus years. Following former President Richard Nixon's signing of the National Cancer Act in 1971, survival of all cancers subsequently improved by almost 35%, and today there are more than 18 million Americans who are cancer survivors. Such impressive advancements are a direct result of years of cancer research conducted in the United States through NIH funding. In communities and cancer centers across the country, we are continually improving standards of care and introducing more options for patients to treat their cancers as a direct result of this research. This work can only continue through unrelenting efforts, and we remain grateful for the NIH and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) funding that has made this lifesaving work possible.

At MSHO, our core mission is to promote equitable and high-quality care for all patients with cancer and blood disorders through advocacy, education and research. Everyone in America has a friend or family member impacted by cancer. These cuts to funding and lifesaving research will threaten the care they might need to survive. Congress must protect and reinstate critical medical and research funding so that we can continue saving and prolonging lives through innovation and scientific discovery.

We strongly urge members of Congress to reaffirm their commitment to maintaining robust and predictable funding for the NIH and the broader scientific field. This will ensure the American people and individuals around the world continue to receive and have access to cutting-edge medical technology and life-altering, frequently lifesaving, health care. It is our sincere hope that the United States will maintain its leadership position in biomedical research and innovation, remaining at the vanguard of discovery and scientific advances for the betterment and health of all humankind.

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