

February, 9, 2009

To the Editor:

We agree with Patrick Swayze's call for a more aggressive assault on cancer, but would suggest that it demands both long-term research by NIH and short-term strategies that can save lives and jobs today.

For example, an innovative and extremely precise genomic test now used widely for pancreatic and other cancers pinpoints the cancer type, as well as its aggressiveness, thus leading to the best treatment. This precision markedly improves patient results and dramatically speeds-up the start of effective treatment—vital since only 24 percent of pancreatic cancer patients are alive one year after they are diagnosed. It can also spare thousands of patients from unneeded removal of their pancreas.

Unfortunately, an outdated Medicare rule is now creating a major obstacle for the clinical laboratories performing such tests and the cancer specialists treating patients. Unless it is resolved, patients will lose access, and the small laboratories may be forced to halt additional research. Many, in fact, are already being faced with closure. What better way to stimulate the economy while improving public health than by making sure such firms remain vibrant?

Investment in real-world tests of this kind, and the small, innovative clinical laboratories that produce them, is certainly as vital as investment in NIH long-term research—in fact, even more so for patients fighting such diseases right now. These firms can bring powerful cancer-fighting tools on-line rapidly, to the patients who need them now, with dramatic next-generation advances often only months after that. The technologies that emerge from the basic R&D at NIH may take decades.

Thus, we applaud Patrick Swayze's heroism and insight. But along with increased funding for NIH, Congress must see to it that these small, innovative firms have the support they need, which includes fixing Medicare glitches that threaten patients today and innovation tomorrow.

Sincerely,

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