President’s Cancer Panel Addresses Cost of Cancer Drugs

Fred Hutch leaders helped shape recommendations that put patients first, promoting value, affordability, and innovation.

March 15, 2018 By Sabin Russell

In a report to the White House released today, an independent advisory group called for “urgent action” to address rapidly rising prices for cancer drugs and the burden cancer patients and their families can face because of the high cost of cancer care.

It issued six recommendations to ensure alignment of drug prices with their value, promote use of high-value drugs, and support innovation in cancer drug development.

Dr. Gary Gilliland, president and director of Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, participated in workshops that led to the drafting of the report, and applauded the panel’s efforts to keep the needs of patients as its central focus.

“We’re not just racing to find cures, we’re racing to find ways to lower the cost of cures, and support innovative ideas like value-based pricing to make health care more affordable to all,” said Gilliland.

The report, “Promoting Value, Affordability, and Innovation in Cancer Drug Treatment,” is the latest released by the advisory group, called the President’s Cancer Panel, which since 1971 has regularly provided U.S. presidents a report on high-priority issues in the nation’s anti-cancer efforts.

It declared that all patients should have affordable access to appropriate drugs, but also underscored that sustained funding for cancer research and partnerships between private biomedical firms and non-profit research institutions are essential.

The report cited a survey by the American Society of Clinical Oncology that found 90 percent of Americans say cancer drugs are too costly. New cancer drugs are entering the market priced at well over $100,000, and the prices of many existing drugs have risen dramatically in recent years, putting patients at risk of “financial toxicity.”

Former Seattle resident Erin Havel is one of them. Diagnosed with chronic myeloid leukemia in
2007, she benefited from the precision oncology drug Gleevec. But as the price of Gleevec climbed — from $26,000 a year when it was approved in 2001 to $146,000 by 2016 — Havel struggled to pay for treatment and basic necessities like groceries, eventually filing for bankruptcy.

Financial toxicity is a major concern and frequent topic of study by the Hutchinson Institute for Cancer Outcomes Research at Fred Hutch. HICOR director Dr. Scott Ramsey, a health economist, is a proponent of value-based pricing and contributed his expertise to the panel report.

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