



UAB MEDICINE

O'Neal Comprehensive
Cancer Center

Testimony By:

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Biomedical Research: Keeping America's Edge in Innovation

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Chair Collins, Vice Chair Murray, Senator Britt, and Members of the Committee: thank you for allowing me to be here today to share how biomedical research conducted in the United States impacts the health of American citizens. **Though I will focus my comments on advances in cancer research and care, I want to emphasize that advances in virtually all chronic and acute illnesses have been equally remarkable – all because of federal investments in biomedical research.**

I am Barry Sleckman, the director of the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). The O'Neal is one of 73 cancer centers designated by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and was one of the first 8 selected when the NCI began this designation program in 1972. I have spent 27 years as a faculty member conducting cancer research at three academic institutions. **My research—along with that of thousands of other scientists in this country—is supported by the federal government, primarily through the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the NCI.** On behalf of these scientists and myself, I would like to thank you all for decades of unwavering bipartisan support for biomedical research. This ongoing investment has allowed American scientists to pursue our passion for making impactful discoveries that improve the health and wellbeing of people in our country and the world.

When I started my medical residency in 1990, I took care of patients with metastatic melanoma whose life expectancy was measured in months. I would not have dared to dream that metastatic melanoma would become a treatable disease in my lifetime. Yet here we are today, with 43% of people diagnosed with metastatic melanoma living 10 years or more, due to treatments that we broadly refer to as cancer immunotherapy. These treatments were discovered through biomedical research that revealed how a patient's immune system can be redirected to attack their cancer, and the federally funded American scientist who pioneered this research was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 2018.

But the impact of NIH and NCI support does not stop at important scientific discoveries. The journey is not complete until these findings are translated into new treatments that benefit patients. To this end, the NIH and NCI provide research support for clinical trials designed to test the safety and efficacy of novel treatments based on new scientific discoveries. For cancer clinical trials, this support comes through the NCI National Clinical Trials Network (NCTN) and the NCI Cancer Centers Program. **As the sophistication and innovation of our research increases, so do the success rates of these trials, saving the lives of many cancer patients.** Indeed, there are thousands of Americans who are alive today and cancer free due to novel treatments they received for their otherwise untreatable cancers through participation in a cancer clinical trial.

The NCI Cancer Centers Program, established with the passage of the National Cancer Act in 1971, provides a national infrastructure to foster excellence in laboratory and clinical research and help prevent, cure, and treat all types of cancer. **To qualify for NCI designation, cancer centers must deliver state-of-the-art facilities, cutting-edge treatments, breakthrough research, and lifesaving clinical trials.** Unified by the rigorous quality standards of the NCI Cancer Centers Program, educate the next generation of the oncology workforce and engage with their communities through cancer prevention, screening, and care.

At the heart of the Cancer Centers Program is a network of 73 cancer centers that span rural and urban areas in 37 states and the District of Columbia. **At any given time, thousands of research studies are underway at these cancer centers, many of which are collaborative and involve several centers, as well as community and industry partners.**

American taxpayers understandably want to know whether they are getting a return on substantial federal investments in biomedical research. I can assure them that these investments have yielded enormous health improvements for people with cancer. **Mortality from cancer has declined by 34% in the past 30 years.** Compared with 8 million cancer survivors in the U.S. in 2000, there were 18 million in 2022. By 2040, this number is expected to reach 26 million – **a total number of cancer survivors greater than the combined populations of the states of Washington, Maine, Alabama, Kentucky, and Connecticut.** In 2000, the average survival of patients with metastatic melanoma was 6.5 months. In 2025, the average survival of these patients is 6 years. There are 39,000 people in the U.S. living with metastatic melanoma. **Senators, NIH- and NCI-funded research advances will provide these people with a combined 215,000 additional years of life.**

Impactful biomedical research that lessens the burden of disease does not only take a village – it takes a country. Until recently, that country has undeniably been the United States. **For generations, the U.S. has prioritized biomedical research, trained the next generation of scientists, and accelerated the pace of disease-curing discoveries.** U.S. citizens and people around the globe have benefited significantly from investments made by the federal government through the NIH and NCI; I have barely scratched the surface of these benefits in my testimony today.



I would like to close with a photo that I keep on my desk as a reminder of the importance of what we do. Each year the O'Neal Comprehensive Cancer Center at UAB honors nine patients at the O'Neal Iron Strong Awards ceremony – nine patients who had otherwise fatal cancers before entering a cancer clinical trial at the O'Neal. **These patients are here today thanks to new experimental treatments they received on these trials.** Take a good look at them. They are young and old, male and female, Black and white. But most importantly, they are all healthy, happy and cancer free – some for over a decade. **Patients like these are why we do what we do. And none of it would be possible without the support of the federal government.** Thank you again for the opportunity to speak on behalf of these patients and the biomedical researchers whose work has given them more life and thank you for taking the time to consider the value of this federally funded biomedical research.