

Medical researchers protest sequestration cuts

By Bryan Dyne
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A “Rally for Medical Research” in Washington, D.C. Monday, called by the American Association of Cancer Research (AACR), drew an estimated 15,000 medical professionals, researchers and patients to protest against the impact of the sequestration cuts on health and science. It is an initial expression of widespread opposition to the bipartisan policy of austerity in the United States.

The “sequester” cuts, signed by President Obama on March 1, slash \$85 billion from the federal budget by the end of the current fiscal year and will cut a total of \$1.2 trillion over the next ten years.

Over one million federal workers will begin unpaid furloughs this month, resulting in 20 to 30 percent pay cuts. Four million long-term unemployed are confronting reduced extended benefits.

These cuts are being followed by Obama’s budget proposal, which will be released today and includes hundreds of billions in cuts to Medicare, Social Security and other key social programs.

The protest by the AACR was focused on the cuts to scientific research, and in particular the cuts to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the largest biomedical research institution in the world. The scientists involved in the demonstration are aware first hand of the human toll the sequester will take, not just in jobs and advances in science, but in lives as well.

Under the sequestration, the \$140 billion of federal funding to scientific research will be cut by seven percent, down to \$130.5 billion. This includes a \$1.6 billion funding cut to the NIH.

The sequester cuts are also greatly affecting other key areas of public health in the United States. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention was cut by \$289 million under the sequester. As a result, tens of thousands of life-saving vaccinations will be denied to

patients, all 12 HIV/STD Prevention Training Centers are being shut down and the tuberculosis programs in eleven states and two territories are being eliminated. Cuts in Medicare have already led cancer clinics to turn away thousands of patients.

The NIH budget has already been frozen for a decade. With inflation, this means a real cut to the budget of some 20 percent.

NIH-funded scientists and research have brought the cure rate of childhood leukemia up to 90 percent, and have helped developed anti-viral drugs that vastly expand the life expectancy of someone living with HIV/AIDS. As a result of NIH studies, the US death rate from heart disease or stroke has fallen by sixty percent over the past half century, and cancer death rates are going down one percent each year. Over the past quarter century the number of elderly with chronic disabilities has fallen by one third.

The impact of the cuts is also economic. For every \$1 dedicated to basic research at the NIH, it is estimated that \$2.21 dollars are returned. Medical advancements that have kept people alive longer and caught diseases earlier have saved the economy several hundreds of billions of dollars. The NIH estimates that cancer research alone has saved \$500 billion dollars through advances in early detection.

All this is directly threatened by the sequester cuts. Not only is the government preventing people from accessing the care they need via cuts to Medicare; it is undermining the ability to create more advanced cures and prevention techniques.

In an interview about the impact of the cuts given to various press agencies, the director of the NIH Dr. Francis Collins stated, “The consequence of a \$1.6 billion loss from the budget for biomedical research [at the] NIH are quite significant. We will be unable to

give out hundreds and hundreds of grants that otherwise would have been funded. ... We will slow down research as a result of this.”

President Obama’s response to the protest was a message read by AACR CEO Dr. Margaret Foti which said, “By investing in the best ideas and supporting the work of our scientists, we will improve health and change lives in ways we could have never imagined.”

The attempt by Obama to portray himself as an opponent of the cuts in science research is a fraud. The sequestration was passed with overwhelming bipartisan support, with the Obama administration and Democrats doing nothing to stop it from going through. The cuts were originally devised by the White House in the attempt to ensure passage of a broader bipartisan agreement to slash federal health care and retirement programs.

Whatever disagreements the White House may have with the Republicans are purely tactical in nature, over how to proceed with massive cuts to social spending.

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