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AACI

# Commentary

## The Urgent Need for Continued Innovation in Cancer Research: Patients Can't Wait

By *Loriana Hernández-Aldama*



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### Commentary Overview

- Disruptions to cancer research threaten to stall the progress we've made. But cancer doesn't wait for funding debates to resolve. It doesn't pause for legislative timelines. Patients need solutions now.
- Research funded by the National Institutes of Health fuels innovation and keeps the momentum going, ensuring that new therapies move quickly from lab to clinic. Without this vital funding, patients are left in limbo, waiting for a breakthrough that may come too late.
- Funding cancer research isn't just about discovering new treatments—it's about caring for the whole patient. We need more research on long-term complications, including PTSD and depression. Cancer patients live with the outcomes of treatment trials long after the research teams move on.
- Mental health services must be integrated into cancer treatment from diagnosis through survivorship. This is especially true for minority patients, who often experience higher levels of emotional distress but are less likely to seek or receive the care they need.

**In 2014, I was living my dream. I had achieved everything I set out to do—Emmy-winning journalist, network news anchor, medical reporter, wife, and mother. But in an instant, my life turned upside down when I was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia (AML).**

## **Suddenly, I wasn't telling other people's stories – I became the story.**

I was shocked to learn that the treatment for AML had not changed in 40 years. My doctors had limited research to lean on, and they told me I had a one-in-four chance of survival – if I were German, not Cuban. They didn't have the data to provide a clear path forward for patients like me, which was terrifying as I sat fighting for my life, separated from my then 2-year-old son. The future of my care was uncertain because the research simply didn't exist.

Five years later, I heard those words again: "You have cancer." This time, it was breast cancer – a direct result of the full-body radiation and toxic treatment used to save my life the first time. The very thing that had once kept me alive had now put me in danger again.

Thankfully, since my diagnosis, progress has been made. More treatments are available, helping more patients survive – and not just survive, but have a better quality of life. But we can't stop here. Without ongoing innovation, cancer care stagnates. And when research slows, patients pay the price.

### **We Can't Afford Delays**

Disruptions to cancer research—whether due to political decisions, financial barriers, or shifting priorities—threaten to stall the progress we've made. But cancer doesn't wait for funding debates to resolve. It doesn't pause for legislative timelines. Patients need solutions now. Every minute, every day, every breakthrough matters.

This is why continued investment in institutions like the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is critical. NIH-funded research has led to groundbreaking discoveries in cancer treatment, clinical trials, and precision medicine. When funding is cut or stalled, that progress is threatened. The ripple effects of these disruptions extend far beyond laboratories and academic institutions – they impact the lives of real patients and their families who are counting on new treatments to survive. NIH research fuels innovation and keeps the momentum going, ensuring that new therapies move from the lab to the clinic without unnecessary delays. Without this vital funding, patients are left in limbo, waiting for the next breakthrough that may come too late.

The urgency of progress cannot be overstated. Cancer is relentless, and so our response must be as well. We need continued investment in research, clinical trials, and patient-centered innovation. We must ensure that funding keeps flowing so that new therapies can be developed and that clinical trials are accessible to all patients – not just a select few. The time to stop innovating is not now; it's never.

### **Funding Goes Beyond Treating the Tumor**

Funding cancer research isn't just about discovering new treatments – it's about treating the whole patient, beyond just the tumor. We need more research into the long-term complications of cancer care, including PTSD and depression. We are human beings living with the outcomes of these treatment trials long after the research teams move on.

Success in cancer care requires a patient-centric approach that considers not only physical survival but also mental and emotional recovery. Mental health impacts adherence and outcomes. Patients need comprehensive care that acknowledges the lifelong impact of cancer and ensures they are supported at every stage of their journey.

For me, the emotional toll of cancer has been just as devastating as the physical battle. I lost not only my health but also my career, my connection to my son, and a sense of control over my future. Yet, mental health care during cancer treatment was almost nonexistent.

Patients like me fight an invisible battle long after treatment ends. PTSD, depression, and anxiety are common yet rarely addressed as part of standard cancer care. Survivorship isn't just about living – it's about rebuilding lives that have been shattered mentally, emotionally, and financially.

Mental health services must be integrated into cancer treatment from the moment of diagnosis and continue through survivorship. This is especially true for minority patients, who often experience higher levels of emotional distress but are less likely to seek or receive the care they need.

### **My Call to Action**

Progress in cancer treatment and research has been monumental, but the fight is far from over.

We cannot afford to slow down. Patients can't wait.

We need to push for more investment in research and clinical trials that account for the diverse needs of patients – not just their physical health but their mental and emotional well-being. We need to ensure that mental health support is woven into the fabric of cancer care so that patients aren't just surviving – they're healing, thriving, and reclaiming their lives.

Cancer is not a battle that can be won by resting on past successes. The future of cancer care depends on what we do now. My life depends on it. And so do the lives of millions more affected by cancer. The time to act is now because patients can't wait.

I've kissed my son goodbye twice to fight for my life and have suffered the long-term complications of my treatment. I don't want a third fight – but if it happens, I want to look my son in the eyes and tell him that we did everything we could. That we pushed for better treatments, demanded mental health support, and ensured that no patient is left behind. Because cancer care isn't just about survival – it's about life beyond the diagnosis. And that future starts with research.

## Our Mission

The Association of American Cancer Institutes (AACI) represents over 100 premier academic and freestanding cancer centers in the United States and Canada. AACI is accelerating progress against cancer by enhancing the impact of academic cancer centers and promoting cancer health equity.

## About AACI Commentary

To promote the work of its members, AACI publishes *Commentary*, a monthly editorial series focusing on major issues of common interest to North American cancer centers, authored by cancer center leaders and subject matter experts.

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