

Supporting the NIH: the Original Crowdfunding of Medical Research

Stephan C. Jahn, Ph.D.

Department of Medicinal Chemistry and UF Health Cancer Center, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32610, USA

Email: scjahn@ufl.edu

Abstract

There is strong support in our society for increased medical research and Americans give generously to private foundations that help fund that research. In this op-ed, I look at how these organizations fit into the national research landscape compared to funding by the NIH and I urge everyone to contact their representatives in Congress since even a small increase in the NIH budget can have a huge impact on research funding that is available to fight disease.

Keywords: advocate, charity, funding, NIH, research

You would be hard-pressed to find someone that didn't support medical research and I think the vast majority of Americans would agree that more money is needed to combat diseases. This is seen through the high levels of support that foundations such as the American Cancer Society and the American Heart Association receive. Most of us have been involved in a fundraiser for one or more of these charities and it's very common to see people showing their support around town through the clothes they wear and decals on their cars. Once I got into science and discovered how incredibly expensive it is to do this type of research, I often wondered how much impact these foundations made in the research world.

Table 1 shows the research budgets of a number of popular private foundations. The numbers are certainly large and are definitely large enough to make a difference in the fight against their associated diseases. In fact, their budgets are so large that they are well beyond what an ordinary person such as myself can fathom. However, the largest of these budgets is \$316 million, belonging to the St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, compared to the research budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) which was

approximately \$20 billion (yes, with a "b"), and this is only the portion of the budget that goes directly to research. The total funding of the private foundations listed here sums up to 4.22% of the NIH research budget. This is well illustrated by the pie chart in Figure 1.

This is taxpayer money and ultimately belongs to the same people that donate their time and money to their charities of choice. A small increase in the NIH budget, 4.22%, would match the contributions of all of these private foundations combined, yet very few people have ever sent a note to their representatives, the people that determine how our nation's money is spent.

I would like to ask everyone that has a stake in medical research, whether it is those of us that depend on it for our salaries or those that the discoveries will benefit (which is every single person in the present and future), to contact their governmental representatives to support increased funding for the NIH. The website at contactingthecongress.org has information on all U.S. Senators and Representatives, including their mailing address, phone number, and a link to their individual web-contact forms.

Funding Source	Research Budget (Millions)
American Cancer Society	160 ^[1]
American Diabetes Association	13 ^[2]
American Heart Association	265 ^[3]
Livestrong Foundation	2 ^[4]
March of Dimes	30* ^[5]
National Institutes of Health	2,000 ^[6]
St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital	316 ^[7]
Susan G. Komen for the Cure	58 ^[8]

Table 1. Research Budgets of Various Funding Agencies.

* indicates that this number represents both research and patient care.

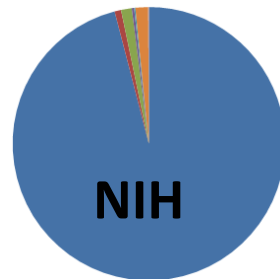


Figure 1. Relative Research Budgets of Various Funding Agencies. The blue represents the NIH and the other colors represent the other foundations listed in Table 1.

I am not suggesting that the private foundations I have mentioned are not worthy causes. They serve many wonderful purposes beyond funding research, including patient care, education, and much of the same advocating to the government that I am encouraging you to do. However, comments to members of Congress from 100,000 individuals are likely to have a larger impact than one organization speaking for 100,000 individuals. Even stronger are those individuals and organizations standing side-by-side.

Of course, the reality is that, unless the overall national budget increases, this money must be taken away from another program in order to increase NIH funding. As I believe the perceived importance of other programs to be a personal viewpoint, I will not discuss my views here. My suggestion is to take those into consideration when contacting your representatives rather than pointing out a problem without suggesting a solution. We as scientists don't appreciate

References

1. American Cancer Society, Where does your money go? (2012)

those types of comments from reviewers and leaders respect that understanding from those asking for a problem to be fixed.

Crowdfunding websites such as kickstarter.com have become popular recently and the practice has made its way into funding science research, with places like experiment.com having already funded a number of projects. The premise of crowdfunding is that if a lot of people give a small amount of money, projects that no one person can fund are able to be taken on. This model isn't new, though. That's exactly how taxes work. We simply have to make our opinions known as to where that money should go. Perhaps the NIH could even experiment with taking input from the public in the form of an online vote to determine toward what disease a set-aside portion of the budget should go, although I believe the bulk of that appropriation should be carried out by scientists. Now, let's put our mouth where our money is.

<http://www.cancer.org/research/infographicgallery/where-does-money-go-2012>, accessed 6-12-14

2. American Diabetes Association, 2013 Financial Report,

http://main.diabetes.org/dorg/PDFs/Finacial/American_Diabetes_Association_Research_Foundation_2013_Financials.pdf, accessed 6-12-14.

3. American Heart Association, 2012-2013 Annual Report,

http://www.heart.org/idc/groups/heart-public/@wcm/@cmc/documents/downloadable/ucm_460995.pdf, accessed 6-12-14.

4. Livestrong Foundation, 2012 Annual Report, <http://ar2012.livestrong.org/>, accessed 6-12-14

5. March of Dimes, 2013 Annual Report, <http://www.marchofdimes.com/materials/2013-annual-report.pdf>, accessed 6-12-14.

6. NIH Report, <http://report.nih.gov/fundingfacts/fundingfacts.aspx>, accessed 6-12-14.

7. St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, 2013 Annual Report, <http://www.marchofdimes.com/materials/2013-annual-report.pdf>, accessed 6-12-14.

8. Susan G. Komen for the Cure, 2011-2012 Annual Report, http://ww5.komen.org/uploadedFiles/Content/AboutUs/Financial/SGK002_AR_2011_2012.pdf, accessed 6-12-14.