

Obama for a change

Barack Obama's victory has been hailed as historic. He takes over from George Bush at a very critical juncture. Unevenly distributed abundance has suddenly evaporated from the world. Societal attitude toward research is shamefully pathetic. There is an overemphasis on being managers, rock stars, and entertainers, while survival statistics in cancer stagnate. Uncommon diseases are neglected as pharmaceutical companies do not see opportunities for making a quick buck. Even treatment of common diseases like lung cancer has not shown any dramatic improvement. Amidst all this gloom, as Barack Obama assumes the presidency of a great democracy, we need to find a new thrust to reach our common goal.

Obama's pre-election plans, before the economic meltdown started, propose a budgetary increase for the National Cancer Institute (NCI), almost doubling it. The plan envisages boosting from 4 to 10% the number of adults participating in clinical trials. Obama has plans to allocate funding for research on rare cancers and for those without effective treatments. He plans to ensure an increase in the access to affordable quality health care through health insurance coverage like the one which is available for Federal employees. The draft envisages support for preventive health care. Insurance agencies discriminating against preexisting conditions like cancer may become an aberration. There is also an emphasis on evidence-based quality improvement in health care interventions. Significantly, there is a proposal to make all information available in the public domain so that patients can compare different health care providers. Obama plans to bring about a change in the area of cancer research by enhancing the budget of NCI for research, with special emphasis

on rare cancers. These are some of the planned initiatives.

The Indian subcontinent faces different problems as compared to the Western countries. Even our present emphasis on basic research to unravel cancer should be an objective to be pursued diligently, but a Google search did not reveal any disease-specific plan proposed by any of the leading political parties from India. What should be the changes that India should envisage? Creation of idea-incubators in the areas of clinical and bench research, creation of an interface between the private and public sector to promote indigenization of appropriate technologies, research to reduce the capital cost of radiation therapy equipments, and rationalization of multiple treatment modalities relevant to the Indian context are some of the feasible initiatives which must be implemented. Change from the current policies, if any, should emphasize increased spending on research and reduction of the cost of cancer care. There are currently a large number of people outside the ambit of reasonable cancer care. The proposed plan by the Andhra Pradesh government to pay large subsidies for the treatment of the underprivileged in private hospitals will benefit only a miniscule proportion of the population, while fattening hospitals in the private sector. Governments should spend tax payers' money prudently while striving to achieve holistic solutions. On an international scale, knowledge sharing between countries should be promoted to reduce the cost of research. Besides, such a measure would be intellectually enriching for the entire community.

There is a need for change; a change which will promote new solutions in cancer research; a change which will ensure a global leadership.

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