

Biden announces an advanced cancer research initiative as part of his 'moonshot' effort

July 27 2023, by Zeke Miller



President Joe Biden speaks in the East Room of the White House in Washington, July 25, 2023. The Biden administration has announced the first cancer-focused initiative under its advanced health research agency. It's aiming to help doctors more easily distinguish between cancerous cells and healthy tissue during surgery and improve patient outcomes. Credit: AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File

President Joe Biden's administration on Thursday announced the first cancer-focused initiative under its advanced health research agency, aiming to help doctors more easily distinguish between cancerous cells and healthy tissue during surgery and improve outcomes for patients.

The administration's Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, or ARPA-H, is launching a Precision Surgical Interventions program, seeking ideas from the public and private sectors to explore how to dramatically improve [cancer](#) outcomes in the coming decades by developing better surgical interventions to treat the disease.

ARPA-H is modeled after the military-focused DARPA, which spawned the internet and GPS. The administration hopes the new investment will yield tools that will help surgeons avoid healthy nerves and blood vessels, while ensuring they can remove all cancerous cells.

ARPA-H, along with the administration's "cancer moonshot," is a key part of Biden's "unity agenda" announced during his 2022 State of the Union address to bring Washington together on a bipartisan basis to combat cancer, improve veterans' health and make [mental health](#) more accessible.

In a statement Thursday announcing the initiative, Biden called it a "major milestone in the fight to end cancer as we know it."

"Harnessing the power of innovation is essential to achieving our ambitious goal of turning more cancers from [death sentences](#) to treatable diseases and—in time—cutting the cancer death rate in half," Biden said. "As we've seen throughout our history, from developing vaccines to sequencing the genome, when the U.S. government invests in innovation, we can achieve breakthroughs that would otherwise be impossible, and save lives on a vast scale."

The initiative could markedly improve cancer treatments and make scientific breakthroughs that have as yet unknown applications, said Arati Prabhakar, the director of the White House Office of Science and Technology.

"What's true is that many cancer treatments still start with surgery," she told The Associated Press in an interview. "So being really smart and attacking and developing new technology to make that first step better could really revolutionize how we are able to treat cancer for so many Americans."

Prabhakar, a former director of DARPA, said most federal research dollars are designed to go to university or government labs, while ARPA-H programs will search more broadly.

"They are just dead focused on those goals, and whoever it takes to get there is who they'll be trying to make sure they bring to the table," she said. "What you're looking for is the quality of the ideas and then the ability to really be bold and fearless and experimenting and then start prototyping in the real world."

The agency is hosting an event in Chicago in September for interested researchers with the aim of quickly identifying and approving projects.

Prabhakar acknowledged that the ARPA-H model entails risks, but she said that even in failure most projects have significant payoffs.

"The mission is to reach for things that aren't that obvious or feasible today—and to do that, you have to take risks," she said. "The process allows you to explore things that could have a bigger impact if they do work and very often what I have seen is that the overall program succeeds even though some of the individual pieces don't succeed."

The Department of Veterans Affairs on Thursday is also announcing that veterans exposed to toxic burn pits during their service will be able to access breast cancer risk assessments and mammograms regardless of their age or if they are enrolled in VA healthcare. And on Tuesday, the department announced that it would study the relationship between deployed servicemembers' toxic exposures and additional cancers.

ARPA-H has also placed an open call for other research objectives, said Danielle Carnival, the director of the White House cancer moonshot, calling the agency's work a "central pillar" of the administration's plans to meet its goals of reducing mortality and improving outcomes from cancer.

"I would expect some really great ideas and new projects to come out of that call," she said.

White House deputy chief of staff Bruce Reed said the ARPA-H announcement helps meet Biden's efforts to show "that government can still work, both sides can come together, and we can get things done."

"Mental health, cancer, veterans, our efforts on fentanyl, are all priorities that affect everyone without regard to party," Reed said.

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Citation: Biden announces an advanced cancer research initiative as part of his 'moonshot' effort (2023, July 27) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-07-biden-advanced-cancer-moonshot-effort.html>

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