

Obama calls on Congress to fund 'precision medicine' studies

30 January 2015, by Lauran Neergaard



President Barack Obama gestures as he speaks in the East Room of the White House in Washington, Friday, Jan. 30, 2015, calling for an investment to move away from one-size-fits-all-medicine, toward an approach that tailors treatment to your genes. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

Holding out the promise of major medical breakthroughs, President Barack Obama on Friday called on Congress to approve spending in medical research that tailors treatment to an individual's genes.

Obama wants \$215 million for what he's calling a precision medicine initiative that moves away from one-size-fits-all treatments. The ambitious goal: Scientists will assemble databases of about a million volunteers to study their genetics—and other factors such as their environments and the microbes that live in their bodies—to learn how to individualize care.

"That's the promise of precision medicine—delivering the right treatment at the right time, every time, to the right person," Obama said

in announcing the proposal Friday.

The effort is a hot but challenging field in medical research that has already yielded some early results.

For example, it's becoming more common for patients with certain cancers to undergo molecular testing in choosing which drug is their best match. People with a rare form of cystic fibrosis now can choose a drug designed specifically to target the genetic defect causing their illness. Some medical centers, such as the Mayo Clinic, have opened "individualized medicine clinics."

But only recently has the cost of genomic sequencing dropped enough, and the computer power of medicine increased, to make it possible for large-scale pursuit of the approach, said Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, which will lead the initiative.

The hope is to "harness the power of science to find individualized health solutions," Collins said.

Obama noted that doctors often try to personalize care, such as matching blood transfusion to blood types.

"What if matching a cancer cure to a genetic code was just as easy, just as standard?" he asked. "What if figuring the right dose of medicines was as simple as taking a temperature?"

In the short term, precision medicine holds the most promise for cancer because scientists already know a lot about the molecular signatures of different tumors, Collins said.

Details of the initiative still are being worked out, but the NIH plans to use some large genomic studies already under way as well as new volunteers, he said.

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