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January 14, 2009

President-Elect Barack Obama
Presidential Transition Team
Washington, DC 20270

Dear President-Elect Obama:

I am writing today on behalf of the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network and our hundreds of thousands of supporters across the country to congratulate you as you become our President and to urge you to use the platform of your Administration to issue a new challenge to our nation's scientific research enterprise to conquer the most complex issues in cancer research.

One of the highlights of your candidacy was "change." As you consider the priorities for your Administration, we ask that you consider how your Administration can change the current scientific research environment. The change I am talking about is not just related to increased funding, although that is an essential element. We need a change in attitude, focus, and morale. While we have made great strides in research for some types of cancer, little progress has been made in others. For example, while overall five year cancer survival rates have increased to an average of 66%, the survival rate for pancreatic cancer, the fourth leading cause of cancer-related death, was 2% in the 1970s and is just 5% today. This means that approximately 95% of those diagnosed with pancreatic cancer die within 5 years. We can do better and American scientific researchers can lead the way.

Funding is certainly a large part of the problem. When adjusted for inflation, the National Cancer Institute's (NCI) budget has decreased by more than 16% since FY 2003. While the overall budget is an issue, we are also concerned about how NCI has set its priorities and allocated the funding. Currently, less than 2% of the NCI's budget is allocated to pancreatic cancer research. This lack of pancreatic cancer research funding has resulted in few researchers being willing to focus on pancreatic cancer. It is estimated that there are fewer than 150 researchers across the country who have a specific focus in pancreatic cancer and receive funding through the NCI. We cannot hope to make true progress in one of the most difficult areas of cancer research if funding is not increased to a point where more of the best and the brightest researchers will be attracted to the field. Your campaign pledge to double NCI funding in 5 years and to provide additional funding for research into cancers without effective treatment options will be critical in addressing these issues and we stand ready to work with you to accomplish these goals. However, funding is not the only issue hindering true progress.

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

2141 Rosecrans Ave., Ste 7000, El Segundo CA 90245
Toll Free 877-272-6226 | P 310-725-0025 | F 310-725-0029

WWW.PANCAN.ORG

GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS

1001 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Ste 600 S, Washington DC 20004
P 202-742-6699 | F 202-742-6518

For too long, the broader scientific research community has faced the challenge of doing more with less. While they have achieved some important successes, the funding crisis has fostered an environment of focusing on “safe bets.” Compared to most other cancers, we know relatively little about pancreatic cancer. More research is needed in the basic biology of the disease to understand how it starts and why it spreads so rapidly. Therefore, pancreatic cancer research does not fall into a “safe bet” category. It falls into the category of high risk/high reward.

The time has come to not only fund new progress and give our researchers the opportunity to do more with more, but to also encourage the research community to tackle the hardest and most complex problems. It is by solving the hardest problems that we will likely see the greatest rewards for the entire field. Injecting new funding into the scientific research community and issuing a challenge to focus on the hardest problems will not only fuel progress, but will also generate jobs and stem the current trend of losing American-trained researchers to other countries more willing to invest in scientific research.

We are greatly encouraged by the ideas you put forward in your cancer plan during your candidacy and would be very interested in having the opportunity to talk to your healthcare team about how cancer research could be re-invigorated during your Administration. Please contact Megan Gordon Don, Director of Government Affairs at 202.742.6776 or mgdon@pancan.org if you have any questions, need further information, or to schedule a meeting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Julie Fleshman".

Julie Fleshman, JD, MBA
President & CEO