



US presidential candidates urged to support health research

Advocates for medical research are eager to hear how the presidential candidates would advance the search for new treatments. Susan Jaffe, *The Lancet's* Washington correspondent, reports.

As the most tumultuous presidential primary season in recent times comes to an end, biomedical researchers, physicians, and advocacy groups want the candidates campaigning for the White House to address some of the substantive matters they worry about: National Institutes of Health (NIH) funding, advancing Alzheimer's disease research, speeding up drug development, and a host of research-related issues.

"We'd love to know more about how the candidates differ in their support of biomedical research but unfortunately that issue has barely been mentioned on the campaign trail", said Jennifer Zeitzer, legislative relations director at the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, which represents 27 professional scientists' associations.

"Our hope is continued strong commitment to advance biomedical research from the new president and Congress", said Gregory Gores, the Mayo Clinic's executive dean for research. "Despite the enormous progress in therapeutic capabilities in the last two decades, we are acutely aware of the unmet medical needs of patients and the challenges that remain."

Earlier this month, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, a Democrat, won primary elections in California and three other states, gaining enough delegates to earn her party's nomination for president when Democrats gather for their convention in Philadelphia in July. She would be the first woman in US history to become the presidential nominee of a major political party. As this article went to press, her rival, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, had pledged to remain in the race, despite increasing pressure to bow out.

In his first run for political office, Republican billionaire real-estate

mogul Donald Trump vanquished no fewer than 16 competitors—including some governors and members of the US Senate—and is expected to become the Republican party's presidential nominee at its convention in Cleveland, also next month.

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Medical research advocates point to encouraging signs of political support, with a Senate committee considering US\$2 billion for the NIH this fiscal year, and continued public interest in the Obama Administration's cancer moonshot—marshalling resources and scientific talent to find cancer treatments—and the precision medicine and BRAIN initiatives.

Mary Woolley, president of Research!America, a coalition of 360 organisations seeking to accelerate medical discoveries, welcomes the NIH support but said, "It will take several more years at that level or more to make up for the losses over the last 10". To make sure there is sustained NIH funding, her group and others plan to attend the party conventions, where they will host educational events for delegates and speak to the committees that will draft the party policy platforms. Research!America is also appealing directly to voters with its Campaign for Cures, to encourage them to ask Clinton and Trump about their response to public health threats like the Zika virus, and their support for biomedical research.

The home stretch

But as Clinton and Trump try out attack lines to prepare for the final phase of the campaign, it might not

be easy to get them to pay more attention to medical research or the fight against deadly diseases. Clinton has said that Trump "is not qualified or temperamentally fit to be president". His ideas, she has said, are "bizarre rants, personal feuds, and outright lies". Trump, meanwhile, has labelled her "crooked Hillary", and calls such attacks "pathetic".

While Trump has yet to issue policy proposals addressing medical research needs, Woolley is hopeful that he will "build out specifics" as more voters ask him about these issues. But Senate majority leader Republican Mitch McConnell, who supports Trump, said the candidate is weak on issues. McConnell told reporters that Trump needs a "highly experienced and very knowledgeable" vice-presidential running mate "because it's pretty obvious he doesn't know a lot about the issues". A spokeswoman for Trump said no one from the campaign was available to be interviewed for this article.

By contrast, Clinton has released several detailed health-related proposals. Woolley said Clinton has "a long-standing history speaking out



For an accompanying podcast by Susan Jaffe see <http://www.thelancet.com/lancet/audio>



on HIV-AIDS, children's health, and women's health...she knows this territory and solidly supports it".

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network will be producing guides to inform voters about the presidential candidates' views on cancer research. The group's volunteers will also ask questions at campaign events. Among other things, they hope both candidates pledge to continue the cancer moonshot project, said Erin O'Neill, senior director for grassroots campaigns.

Test run: Alzheimer's disease

In New Hampshire last year, the campaigns provided a preview of the kind of discussion between candidates and voters that research and patients' advocacy groups would like. It revealed a stark difference between Clinton and Trump on funding for Alzheimer's research and support for those caring for the 5.4 million Americans stricken with the disease.

Every year, about half a million people get Alzheimer's disease and the number of cases is expected to triple by 2050, said Robert Egge, executive director of the Alzheimer's Impact Movement (AIM), a sister organisation of the Alzheimer's Association. The cost of caring for Alzheimer's patients is an estimated \$236 billion a year, which he said is likely to quadruple over the same

time period, growing even faster than the population of Alzheimer's cases because there will be more people in the later stage of the disease when the costs are higher.

At a town hall meeting last August in New Hampshire, Trump answered questions from the audience. He called on Brenda Bouchard, who said her husband and her mother have Alzheimer's, and then asked him, "What will you do to ensure that this devastating disease is a top priority?"

"It's a total top priority for me", said Trump, whose father had Alzheimer's disease. "I have so many friends whose family is devastated by Alzheimer's so, it's—believe me, it's a total priority. That's something that we should be working on and we can get an answer. There are some answers. They've made less progress than we had hoped as you know. But there's some answers."

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Before providing details, he took another question. "I felt he gave lip service to Alzheimer's", said Bouchard, recalling the exchange. "I would have thought that someone who has seen the ugliness of Alzheimer's, up close and personal, would have been more thoughtful and passionate about what needs to be done."

Bouchard has been taking care of her husband since he developed early onset Alzheimer's 11 years ago, as well as her mother who was diagnosed with the disease 5 years ago. Since last summer, Bouchard has attended political events across the state, asking more than a dozen presidential candidates about their proposals for dealing with Alzheimer's disease. She eventually became an AIM member and now supports Clinton. Last December, she introduced the candidate at a New Hampshire meeting with voters, shortly after

Clinton released a policy proposal for Alzheimer's disease research.

"It is the sixth leading cause of death in America but unlike the other causes in the top ten, there's no real path to prevention or effective treatment or a cure as there is with other diseases that take so many lives", Clinton told the meeting. "After talking to experts, the leading experts in our country, not just in Alzheimer's but in other neurodegenerative diseases like Parkinson's, the overwhelming response was if we invested just \$2 billion more a year, we would make tremendous progress and we would have a real shot at understanding more about this disease and trying to cure it."

Egge said his group has offered several times to brief the presidential candidates on the issue and provide background information. Although none of the Republican presidential candidates responded, he said his staff held several meetings and phone conversations with the Clinton campaign.

In addition to boosting funding for Alzheimer's research, Clinton has called for creating a Medicare benefit to cover care planning to help patients understand what to expect from the disease and how to prepare for it, and to require documentation of their diagnosis in their medical record.

Since her days as First Lady, when her husband Bill Clinton was president in the 1990s, Hillary Clinton has "had an ear and an appetite for innovation in biomedical research", said Margaret Anderson, executive director at Faster Cures, which focuses on accelerating drug development.

When the campaign shifts into high-gear after the conventions, advocates expect to hear about how Trump would ensure progress on biomedical research, as well as additional details from Clinton. "It would worry me if we were having the same conversation in September", said O'Neill.

Susan Jaffe