



Biden's science adviser resigns over bullying

Experts say that Eric Lander's resignation should not affect the President's plans to reboot the cancer moonshot project. Susan Jaffe reports.

As President Joe Biden enters his second year in office, he is reviving a biomedical research initiative that is not just a policy priority, but a personal one too. Biden relaunched the cancer moonshot programme with a new aim: reduce cancer mortality by half in 25 years. "This can really be an American moment that proves to ourselves and quite frankly, to the world, that we can do really big things," he told a gathering at the White House earlier this month. "We can end cancer as we know it."

But just 5 days later, on Feb 7, the new project lost its director, Eric Lander, who was also the director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and the president's science adviser. He resigned from his government posts hours after *Politico* reported that a 2 month White House investigation concluded Lander had bullied members of his staff, a violation of White House workplace policy.

The day after his resignation, Lander was scheduled to testify before a congressional committee about another major science initiative, the Advanced Research Projects Agency for Health, which Biden proposed last year as a fast track for transforming basic science into real-world applications. Biden has requested US\$6.5 billion for the new agency, which would be housed within the National Institutes of Health. The hearing proceeded without Lander and no one else from the administration appeared in his place.

Asked about Lander's departure, Ned Sharpless, director of the National Cancer Institute (NCI), minimised its effect, echoing the comments of others contacted by *The Lancet*: "I'm not really worried about this," he said. "I think the president has a terrific number of really

awesome scientists who are eager to provide the president with advice and I think that the planning for the cancer moonshot is much bigger than any one individual."

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Biden has long been associated with the fight against cancer since his son, Beau, died of brain cancer in 2015 aged 46. "It's one of the reasons why, quite frankly, I ran for President," he said. At the direction of President Barack Obama, then Vice President Biden headed the original cancer moonshot in 2016, funded with \$1.8 billion under the 21st Century Cures Act. It was named after President John F Kennedy's 1961 call to marshal government resources to land a man on the moon and return him safely. But that funding ends in 2023.

"So, it's a great time to be talking about building on that initial effort," said Sharpless. Although the NCI will continue to play a major role in cancer research, he said inadequate funding means "there are lots of completely new opportunities for cancer research that we're not really doing yet".

The "supercharged"—as Biden calls it—second phase of the cancer moonshot aims to cut the current age-adjusted cancer death rate—estimated to surpass 600 000 in 2022—by at least 50% within the next 25 years and help cancer survivors, their families, and their caregivers navigate the health-care system.

"When we have made progress with cancer immunology, gene cell therapy, and personalised medicine generally, it would be tragic to slow

down now", said Eleanor Dehoney, vice president of policy and advocacy at Research!America.

Biden is also creating a "cancer Cabinet", including the secretaries of agriculture, defence, energy, and health and human services, and the Environmental Protection Agency administrator. "This whole-of-government approach" expands the scope of the cancer moonshot, said Danielle Carnival, a neuroscientist and senior adviser to the director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, who Biden appointed last June to oversee the programme.

Carnival said other priorities for the new moonshot include "addressing the inequities in outcomes and in quality of care, finding new approaches to deal with deadly and rare cancers, [and] making sure we're targeting the right treatments to the right patients".

Biden has not said how much the new project will cost, but Sharpless is optimistic that Congress will provide the necessary funding. "This is not a partisan issue," he said. "Everyone wants to make progress for patients with cancer."

Washington state Representative, Cathy McMorris Rodgers, the senior Republican member of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, supports the goal of the cancer moonshot. But she says it is undermined by legislation Biden has advocated to reduce prescription drug prices. In a preview of the debate to come, her spokesperson said Rodgers urges the administration to "abandon its plans to adopt socialist price controls, which will crush innovation and patient access to treatments".

Susan Jaffe

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