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## Forum

## Ensuring A Healthier Future

## Increased medical research funding will save lives...and dollars



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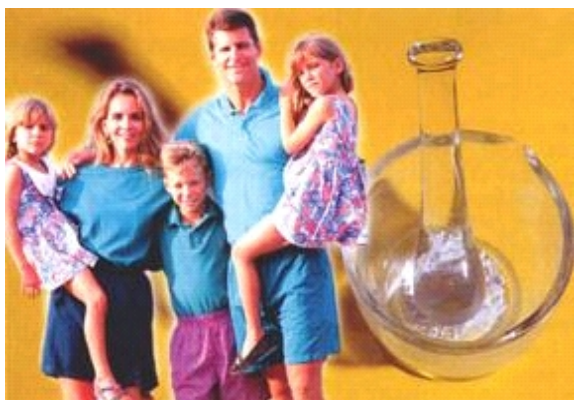
By Paul G. Rogers

I'm part of the "silver generation," meaning those of us over 65. We count as our colleagues in the silver generation former President Ronald Reagan, who spent most of his 70s in the White House, Sen. John Glenn, one of the pioneers in space who, at the age of 77, will prove to us in his scheduled October space mission that you are never too old to touch the stars, baseball great Hank Aaron, and Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

Unfortunately, in some ways, the silver generation's reputation is a bit tarnished. We are often thought of as costing society rather than contributing to it—costing, that is, big dollars, particularly in health care. This nation spends one trillion dollars a year on health care, and older citizens are frequently singled out as a main reason for the high costs. And we are, to some degree, responsible. According to the American Federation for Aging Research, in 1992 the silver generation accounted for nearly 38 percent of the national health care bill. As we get older we are more likely to face chronic and debilitating diseases. Cancer, heart disease and stroke are leading causes of death among the elderly. Other diseases, such as Alzheimer's and osteoporosis are, at the very least, disabling, and all are very costly to society.

But instead of pointing fingers and lamenting costs, we as a nation need to focus our energy on ensuring that medical research is funded at a level to match scientific opportunity. This is important for two reasons: money saved and lives enriched.

According to the American Federation for Aging Research and the Alliance for Aging Research, this nation will save about \$50 billion a year when we can delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease by five years, and \$69 billion annually when we can delay the onset of cardiovascular disease by five years. However, currently the federal government funds only about one in four medical research proposals that might lead to preventing, treating and curing the diseases that plague our generation now, as well as future generations.



It is time for all of us, young and old, to unite as advocates for medical research. Medical research has the power of favorable public opinion. Since 1992 Research!America has conducted public opinion polls regarding medical research, and has consistently found strong public support. Last year, polls were conducted in five states, and 60 percent or more of those polled favored doubling funding for medical research.

In addition, *The Wall Street Journal* and NBC-TV conducted a national poll and found similar results, with 64 percent nationwide favoring doubling funding for medical research. Support for medical research is so strong that Research!America polls have found more than half of those surveyed are willing to pay more in taxes and for health care insurance if it can be guaranteed that the money will be used for medical research. More than half also indicate that they would consider donating a portion of their income tax

refund to medical research if they are given the opportunity.

We can make advocacy for medical and health research our gift to our children and grandchildren.

President Clinton's new budget plan not only seeks to strengthen Medicare and fortify Social Security, but also includes a 21st Century Research Fund that he calls "our gift to the millennium." The fund would allow for the largest funding increase in history for the National Institutes of Health. The NIH is the main federal agency that allocates taxpayer dollars to scientists, universities, medical schools, hospitals and private laboratories across the country to conduct medical research, and has a current budget of \$13.6 billion. (To put this number into perspective, we spend about \$15 billion a year buying and renting videotapes. It's astounding to think that we spend more on passive entertainment than on ensuring a healthier future for us all!)

The National Institutes of Health includes several institutes, including the National Institute on Aging, which leads the federal effort on aging research. However, the NIA budget is about \$519 million this year, translating into a paltry \$15 per person over the age of 65 for research on such topics as the aging process, the onset of age-related disease, demographic research on the changing age composition of the population, and the impact of the aging population on society.

It's important to note that NIA isn't the only agency that conducts research that impacts us. The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, and the National Cancer Institute, to name just a few, also conduct research that will lead to longer and better quality lives for all citizens, including those of us in the silver generation.

Under the president's proposal, these agencies should see increases in funding, including a 65 percent increase in cancer research funding over the next five years. When Vice President Gore announced the increase in cancer research funding, he said, "For the first time, the enemy is outmatched."

I say, "It's about time."

I was a member of Congress and participated in getting the National Cancer Act passed just over 25 years ago. We fired the first shots but failed to wage an all-out war. General Norman Schwarzkopf said it best when he testified on September 26, 1996, before the Senate Special Committee on Aging and the Senate Committee on Appropriations: "The American people would not stand for a military operation that, like in the battle against cancer, has taken 25 years and claimed 10 million lives. I implore the Congress, the president, business leaders and all Americans to join me in the front lines against this enemy. This is a war we can win."

We all do need to get fighting mad about the fact that we currently spend more than twice as much each year on tennis shoes than we do on the budget of the National Cancer Institute.

It's important to note that we've already succeeded on many fronts. For example, more effective ways have been found to diagnose breast cancer earlier. The childhood death rate from cancer has dropped 62 percent since 1960, allowing more people than ever to become part of the silver generation. Still, according to the National Cancer Institute, cancer costs this nation \$107 billion annually. When we find the cure for cancer, the nation's health care bill will be dramatically reduced.

Cardiovascular diseases and stroke cost this nation more than \$274 billion a year, according to the American Heart Association. Medical researchers have discovered ways to reduce our risk of heart disease and stroke as well as treat these diseases. Recently, tissue plasminogen activator (tPA), was approved by the Food and Drug Administration as a treatment for stroke. tPA breaks up blood clots in the brain to stop the progression of a stroke, but unfortunately it is not effective for everyone. For example, tPA must be used within the first three hours of symptoms in order to be effective, and victims must recognize they are having a stroke and seek medical attention quickly.

Alzheimer's disease is a progressive, neurodegenerative disease that typically strikes in a person's seventh or eighth decade. This disease has recently received more attention with the diagnosis of former President Reagan, and while we have made progress in determining what causes the disease, there is as yet no cure.

Osteoporosis is a silent disease in that it frequently isn't diagnosed until a fracture has occurred. More research needs to be done into the diagnosis and treatment of this disease.

Cancer, cardiovascular diseases, Alzheimer's disease and osteoporosis are only a few of the threats to the silver generation's health and well-being. President Clinton's 1999 budget proposals to increase research funding is a first step, but his proposals now go to Congress for funding, and there are several members on Capitol Hill who endorse doubling funding.

Do you know how your senators and representative stand on this issue? When was the last time you called them to let them know how you stand? If each of us called or wrote our members of Congress and encouraged them to support doubling spending for medical research, there is no doubt that medical and health research would become a higher national priority.

We need to attend town meetings sponsored by our members of Congress and talk with them about support for medical research. We need to speak out for research.

Ninety-eight years ago, at the turn of the present century, the average person lived to be about 47 years old. Today, once we reach the age of 65, we can expect, on average, to live 17 more years. The gifts of medical research will help ensure that those 17 years (and beyond) are healthier and happier.

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