

September 7, 2012

The Honorable Sheldon Whitehouse
U.S. Senator
United States Senate
717 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Whitehouse,

We are writing on behalf of the Board of Directors of the American Association for Cancer Research (AACR) to express strong opposition to the Pancreatic Cancer Research and Education Act (H.R. 733 & S.362). While we share your sense of urgency and unwavering commitment to improving the treatments that are currently available to pancreatic cancer patients, this legislation would undermine the National Institutes of Health (NIH) peer review process and may have the unfortunate effect of slowing advances in the diagnosis, treatment, and cure of this devastating disease.

The AACR's mission is to prevent and cure the more than 200 diseases we call cancer. Its membership, which includes more than 34,000 laboratory, translational and clinical researchers; population scientists; other health care professionals; and cancer advocates residing in more than 90 countries, is united in its dedication to accelerating cancer research across all cancers.

The Pancreatic Cancer Research and Education Act threatens the integrity of the peer review process at the NIH and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) by allowing for the formation of an external committee to provide oversight, prioritize research, and make funding recommendations. The NIH has had a longstanding history of supporting the most promising and meritorious biomedical and behavioral research using a broad range of mechanisms which have been affirmed almost without exception through its expert peer review process. The NIH peer review process recognizes the fact that the pathway to discoveries in a particular organ site can come from scientific findings in unrelated areas of medicine. For this reason, 40 percent of NCI's budget supports basic cancer research, the findings of which could be extrapolated to speeding advances in the diagnosis, treatment, and cure of pancreatic cancer. In fact, if we are to make progress in reducing the morbidity and mortality rates for people with pancreatic cancer, it is likely going to be dependent on integrating our knowledge and investigations across diseases.

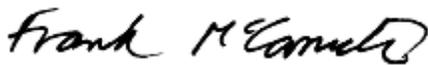
In addition, this legislation would establish a dangerous precedent where many other disease-specific patient advocacy organizations will likely request a similar approach. This would further weaken the NIH merit review process by creating silos between studies of affected organs and fragment our Nation's research efforts in pancreatic cancer.

As an organization that fosters the highest quality of cancer research, the AACR shares your frustration with the slow pace of progress in pancreatic cancer research and recognizes that new approaches are sorely needed to decrease the morbidity and mortality rates for those suffering from pancreatic cancer. To this end, and in conjunction with the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network, the AACR recently sponsored the “Pancreatic Cancer: Progress and Challenges” Special Conference on June 18-21, 2012, in Lake Tahoe, Nevada. More than 450 scientists were in attendance to share results, form new collaborations, and brainstorm about novel approaches and strategies to make progress and increase the survival rates for pancreatic cancer patients.

The AACR Board of Directors has enormous empathy for patients and their families who have been affected by pancreatic cancer. We are all extremely committed to improving survival rates for pancreatic cancer patients and will continue to work closely with the pancreatic cancer research and advocacy community, such as the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network. That said, we are not in agreement that there is a “legislative fix” to improve the mortality and morbidity rates for pancreatic cancer patients. We believe that this legislation will be counterproductive, especially at this unprecedented moment in time when we are increasing our understanding of how different cancers share molecular features and applying the knowledge learned across many different types of cancers.

Thank you for your consideration of our concerns. Please contact Jon Retzlaff, AACR’s Managing Director for Science Policy and Government Affairs, on 202-898-6499, if we can provide you with any additional information or assistance.

Sincerely,



Frank McCormick, PhD, FRS, DSc (Hon)
AACR President



Margaret Foti, PhD, MD (hc)
Chief Executive Officer