ASCO Names Advance of the Year: Cancer Immunotherapy

New Report Examines Recent Progress Against Cancer, Underscores Payoff of Nation’s Investment in Cancer Research

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WASHINGTON — At a Capitol Hill briefing today, the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) announced immunotherapy as the top cancer advance of the year. Recent breakthroughs in immunotherapy – along with almost 60 other important cancer research advances – are described in ASCO’s just-released report, Clinical Cancer Advances 2016: ASCO’s Annual Report on Progress Against Cancer. ASCO’s report also calls for sustained robust federal funding for cancer research, asserting its pivotal role in driving progress.

“No recent cancer advance has been more transformative than immunotherapy. These new therapies are not only transforming patient lives, they are also opening intriguing avenues for further research,” said ASCO President Julie M. Vose, MD, MBA, FASCO. “Advances like these require bold ideas, dedication and investment in research. If we are to conquer cancer, we need to invest more as a nation to support a strong biomedical research enterprise.”

The award-winning report, now in its 11th year, was published today, on World Cancer Day, in the Journal of Clinical Oncology. The ASCO Clinical Cancer Advances 2016 report explores the key advances across the cancer care continuum, from prevention to treatment and survivorship.

Highlighting key policy issues and developments that impact the future of U.S. cancer research and the pace of progress, the report also identifies emerging cancer care trends, such as new precision medicine strategies to tackle treatment-resistant cancers and increasing research on improving patient quality of life.

Immunotherapy: A Vital Treatment Option for a Growing Number of Cancers

As described in the report, new immunotherapies that block the so-called PD-1/PD-L1 immune
checkpoint have extended survival from months to years for patients with advanced melanoma. Over the past year, researchers showed that patients with several other advanced cancers can also benefit from these therapies.

In 2015, the FDA approved PD-1/PD-L1 immunotherapies to treat the most common forms of advanced lung and kidney cancer – both resistant to existing treatments. In addition, early clinical trial findings showed that such therapies may also slow the growth of bladder, liver, head and neck, and other cancers. Last year, researchers also saw early signs of success with other emerging immunotherapy strategies, such as T-cell therapies for blood cancers and therapeutic cancer vaccines for glioblastoma.

“Increasingly, we're seeing that immunotherapy is able to control cancer growth longer, and may be easier for some patients to tolerate than traditional chemotherapies and targeted drugs,” said Clinical Cancer Advances 2016 Co-Executive Editor Don S. Dizon, MD, FACP. “The next challenge is to expand the benefits of immunotherapy to more people with cancer.

Conquering Cancer Requires Sustained U.S. Federal Investment in Research

According to ASCO, federal funding to the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) is the backbone of progress against cancer, supporting pioneering research that is the basis of many cancer breakthroughs. More than one-third of the major advances featured in ASCO’s report were made possible by our nation’s investment in cancer research.

Among those are new strategies to reduce the risk of breast cancer recurrence, a new regimen of targeted drugs for a hard-to-treat form of ovarian cancer, and an analysis uncovering remarkable gains in long-term childhood cancer survival.

ASCO notes that Congress has taken an important step in recognizing the vital importance of federal research by increasing Fiscal Year 2016 funding for NIH and NCI. “This hard-fought victory came after a decade-long decline in NIH funding,” said Dr. Vose. “We urge Congress to build on this year’s NIH and NCI investment to ensure tomorrow’s cures.”

A digital, full-color version of the report with additional graphics and resources is available at CancerProgress.Net/CCA. (Please note: animations about cancer immunotherapy and the role of federal funding in conquering cancer will be available on February 4th.)

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Cancer Immunotherapy: ASCO’s Advance of the Year 2016

About ASCO:

Founded in 1964, the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) is the world’s leading professional organization representing physicians who care for people with cancer. With nearly 40,000 members, ASCO is committed to improving cancer care through scientific meetings, educational programs and peer-reviewed journals. ASCO is supported by its affiliate organization, the Conquer Cancer Foundation, which funds ground-breaking research and programs that make a tangible difference in the lives of people with cancer. For ASCO information and resources, visit www.asco.org. Patient-oriented cancer information is available at www.cancer.net.