Scientific Leaps Require Donors to Give Bigger

By John Notter

Money, we can all agree, matters. It doesn’t buy happiness, but it certainly buys a ton of scientific research of vital importance to human health. Without that, the pursuit of happiness wouldn’t even be possible.

And things are beginning to look a bit bleak in that regard. Government funding, which has long supported the bulk of basic scientific research, is increasingly threatened in the U.S. If we hope to capitalize on the remarkable progress made in molecular medicine over the past few decades to solve such intractable problems as cancer, diabetes, and other diseases, something will have to change—and soon. Wealthy donors and big foundations will have to take the lead in finding ways to ensure that money keeps flowing to the sharpest minds in science. That will require a willingness to take on risk, something often discussed in philanthropic circles but acted upon by only a few donors and philanthropies.

Consider the numbers. Fewer than one in seven biomedical researchers who today apply for a grant from the National Institutes of Health will receive one—a historic low. In 2013 alone, the NIH budget was cut by more than $1.5-billion, and 605 fewer investigators had the most commonly issued NIH grants. To make matters worse, the type of funding that does exist is often focused on short-term objectives, precluding the kind of big-picture thinking and long-term research that fuel medical breakthroughs.

All this has significant implications for public health. Take the impact on cancer research. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the U.S.—nearly 14 million Americans have had or are currently fighting cancer, and some 1,600 die from some form of the disease each day, accounting for one in four deaths in the country. As Americans age, these numbers could rise precipitously. Equipping researchers to address this public-health challenge is both essential and entirely possible, but only if they are supported in the right way.
I believe Ludwig Cancer Research offers a powerful model for such support.

My former boss and mentor, the shipping magnate Daniel K. Ludwig, joined the fight against cancer in 1971. He wanted to establish an enterprise whose “agenda would not be dictated by changing policies of government or the vagaries of public interest” but would foster major advances in cancer research through fixed purpose and steady support.

To that end, he donated his international business holdings to defeating cancer, starting the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research. He also asked that after he died, his U.S.-based assets be put into a trust to support Ludwig Centers at six leading U.S. research institutions, which were established in 2006.

Mr. Ludwig, at one time among the world’s richest men, died in 1992, but his thinking has continued to influence the flow of donations in a way that others may want to emulate. Rather than structuring his bequest to solve the defined problems of his day, he established a funding mechanism that would be amenable to the evolving requirements of a rapidly advancing scientific field. This required finding a way to provide flexible, long-term support that could respond to the needs of the best minds engaged in cancer research—largely freeing them of the need to raise money for their work.

A patient philanthropist, Mr. Ludwig ensured that his legacy did not fall prey to the cautious incrementalism that often comes with short-term goals and restrictive milestones. Today the organizations that make up Ludwig Cancer Research enable more than 600 scientists around the world to pursue the most promising avenues of research, with a special emphasis on the kind that lead to preventive interventions and lifesaving therapies.

Last January, the Ludwig Centers received a final infusion of $540-million from Mr. Ludwig’s estate as additional real-estate assets in Manhattan were sold—in response to propitious market conditions—bringing his total investment in cancer research to $2.5-billion. The impact funding provided for this effort is inspired by lessons learned from Mr. Ludwig’s deceptively simple formula for success: attract the best and brightest experts to a chosen cause and give them the freedom to pursue projects that are high risk and have potentially high rewards.

This is especially needed today. We are making swift progress to explore the molecular causes of what once seemed to be intractable diseases, but their cures will continue to elude us in the absence of steady—and unrestricted—financing for research.

It doesn’t make sense to distract top scientists from their work by asking them to raise money. Yet that is precisely what is happening today at most research institutions. We in philanthropy owe it not just to scientists but to the patients they will ultimately help to provide more reliable financing for scientific research.

John Notter is chairman of the board of the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research.