World Cancer Day: Finding Cures Requires Risk-Taking

By investing in research, we can work together to prevent cancer and find cures to save lives.

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By Yung S. Lie, PhD, President and CEO of the Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation

As recent headlines have declared, we have much to celebrate on **World Cancer Day**: the cancer death rate in the United States has fallen 27% from its peak in 1991. Many factors have contributed to this including the decrease in smoking and improved screening efforts. Tremendous advances in research and technology have been critical to this progress. Our ability to understand the genetic basis of cancer has rapidly accelerated over the last ten years, and now scientists are decoding cancer on an unprecedented scale. This has resulted in more effective precision medicine approaches, treating patients with the therapies to which their cancers are most likely to respond.

As we pause to reflect on our progress, we recognize that challenges still lie ahead. Cancer remains the leading cause of death across the globe and the second-most common cause in the United States. By 2040, the global burden is expected to balloon to 27.5 million new cancer cases and 16.3 million cancer deaths due to the growth and aging of the global population.

The scale of this challenge requires nothing short of paradigm-shifting, groundbreaking research that results only from scientists thinking radically. For the last 72 years, the Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation has funded bold, young scientists, and this approach has paid off in scientific breakthroughs that are saving lives. As Damon Runyon alumnus and Nobel Laureate James E. Rothman, PhD, said, “Science is all about risk. If you’re not willing to tolerate failure, you’re not going to succeed in science.” At Damon Runyon, we **encourage and embrace** risk to create the best opportunities for success.

Recent studies have shown that traditional funding sources, including the federal government, discourage risk-taking research and are actually slowing scientific advance. They are more likely to support projects that are established and “safe,” but will not necessarily lead to breakthroughs. Now, more than ever, we are making a greater commitment to finding cures for cancer. We want to provide our scientists with the resources to be able to take risks and experimentally address significant questions in cancer research. This year, Damon Runyon has increased our Clinical Investigator and Damon Runyon-Rachleff Innovator Awards by 33%, to make sure they have the

support to pursue groundbreaking research.

Damon Runyon has invested nearly $360 million in more than 3,700 of the most brilliant cancer researchers in the world. We believe in backing young, audacious risk-takers who can make transformational discoveries. Their research proved that cigarette smoking causes cancer, cured solid tumors using chemotherapy, harnessed the immune system to attack cancer, and pioneered CRISPR gene editing. Our scientists have helped revolutionize cancer research.

Cancer does not discriminate. It affects everyone — young and old, around the globe. This year's World Cancer Day theme, **"I am, I will"** acknowledges that everyone has the capacity to address the cancer burden. By investing in research, we can work together to prevent cancer and find cures to save lives.

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