NIH director outlines opportunities in biomedical research

Francis S. Collins, MD, PhD, director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), did not come to the MGH to stress the current economic outlook for research, but the topic appeared to be on everyone’s mind in the packed Simches Research Center conference room Sept. 9.

NIH spending surged dramatically between 1998 and 2003, but has since flattened, Collins said, and further significant resource constraints may lie ahead. “I’m guardedly optimistic,” he reported. “The message we are sending is that research is a really important investment for human health and the economy. It creates jobs and stimulates American competitiveness.”

That message has been enthusiastically received by the Obama administration, Collins noted, and over the past few months he has met with some 53 members of congress and 14 senators to hammer it home.

“Don’t worry too much about the course we are on,” Collins advised researchers. “We may be at a rough and tumble moment, but there is a sufficiently critical mass of people who wish us well. Just keep going and don’t stop now.”

What Collins did come to speak about were “exceptional opportunities in biomedical research.” He devoted most of his talk – which was sponsored by the Executive Committee on Research – to outlining the multifaceted efforts of NIH to advance both basic and clinical research, a list that included accelerating discovery through technology, looking at better and more efficient ways to speed the development of new drugs, promoting collaboration between researchers and industry, and developing new ways to design clinical trials.
Raising heart disease awareness

FOR JENNIFER MCINTYRE, RN, BSN, an MGH clinical nursing supervisor, witnessing complex medical procedures is an ordinary part of her day. It wasn’t routine, however, when she became a patient last year and needed double bypass surgery to treat a 90 percent blockage in her left main artery. She credits her medical team at the MGH — led by cardiac physician Shawn Gregory, MD, and surgeon Thomas MacGillivray, MD — for her successful surgery and recovery.

Determined to give back to those who took care of her at the MGH, McIntyre laced up her sneakers and hit the pavement on Sept. 10, joining nearly 10,000 walkers in the American Heart Association’s (AHA) 2011 Boston Heart Walk. Teams from the MGH raised more than $30,000 for the cause. McIntyre walked the longest route, six miles, in support of Ellison 2 (Cardiac Access), Ellison 8 (Cardiac Surgery) and Blake 8 (Cardiac Surgery Intensive Care Unit). “The walk was a festival for me. It was great to see people younger than me, my age and older all together to celebrate life. We are the lucky ones, and we wanted to show it,” says McIntyre.

McIntyre, the mother of two young children, wanted to extend her gratitude to the nurses who cared for her and at the same time, create awareness about heart health. “I wanted to do anything to help the AHA get the word out about heart disease,” she says. “I have a special interest in women — as, of course, I am one — but I also wanted people to know what they can do after bypass.”

As part of the awareness effort, McIntyre shared the list of her symptoms. She had no family history of heart disease, exercised regularly, didn’t smoke and her cholesterol levels were not high. She did, however, experience a lingering pain in her chest. After experiencing the pain for almost two months and ignoring the symptoms, she knew she had to see her doctor. What she thought was heartburn turned out to be much more.

After going through surgery, however, McIntyre says she gained a new perspective. She always had the skills and compassion of a nurse, but says she can now better connect with the patient experience and share her story with others.

Her advice to patients — “Don’t deny the symptoms. People like me can have heart disease too.”

IN THE UNITED STATES, approximately 30 percent to 60 percent of patients utilize complementary or alternative medicine (CAM). And although the use of alternative medicine is increasing, many U.S. health care professionals do not feel they are fully prepared to manage patients who utilize CAM as part of their treatment.

To help educate caregivers about acupuncture, one of the most common CAM treatments, the MGH Chinese Scientist and Staff Association (CSSA) held a seminar, “Acupuncture in Health and Disease,” Sept. 8 in the Simches Research Center. Nearly 100 physicians, nurses, health care professionals, scientists and acupuncturists from across the Greater Boston area attended the event. The seminar, accredited by Harvard Medical School (HMS) Continuing Medical Education, was the second in the CSSA series, “Introduction to the Use of Evidence-Based Traditional Chinese Medicine.” Traditional Chinese medicine includes acupuncture and herbal medicine as well as diagnostics.

The event’s first speaker, Weidong Lu, LAc, MD, MPH, PhD, of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, introduced the emerging field of oncology acupuncture, which recently has been applied in clinical trials. Vitaly Napadow, PhD, LAc, of MGH Imaging and the BWH Pain Management Center, then presented his novel findings using functional magnetic resonance imaging to delineate the mechanisms underlying acupuncture effects on brain activity related to clinical improvements. A question and answer session followed the presentations. The seminar — organized with support from MGH Human Resources and the MGH Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine — was presided over by Albert Yeung, MD, of the MGH Depression Clinical and Research Program, an expert in the use of acupuncture to treat depression.

“We are so grateful that this program has drawn more and more people’s attention,” says Winnie Shum, PhD, of the MGH Center for Systems Biology, the past president and currently a committee member of the CSSA. “We hope that eventually traditional Chinese medicine can become a standard option for patients here in Boston. Indeed, traditional medicine is already being practiced together with Western medicine in many major Asian cities, like Hong Kong and Singapore.”

The CSSA will host its next seminar, “Traditional Chinese Medicine and Inflammation-Related Diseases,” Dec. 1. Darshan Mehta, MD, MPH, medical director of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine, will be the moderator and invited speakers are David Yue-Wei Lee, PhD, director of the Bioorganic and Natural Products Research Laboratory of the Mailman Research Center at McLean Hospital; and Yung-Chi Cheng, PhD, the Henry Bronson Professor of Pharmacology at Yale University. For more information, email cssa@partners.org.
A dream come true for MGH Cancer Center patient

IT WAS A WARM SUMMER DAY, but 61-year-old Kathy Taraschi of Dedham, Mass., gave shivers to the crowd at Fenway Park during her flawless rendition of the national anthem during the Sept. 3 pregame ceremony. The once-in-a-lifetime performance in front of approximately 37,000 Red Sox fans was especially meaningful for Taraschi, an MGH Cancer Center patient.

Taraschi was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008 and discovered a reoccurrence of the disease this past June. While she only recently began treatment, Taraschi and her team of MGH Cancer Center caregivers – including Beverly Moy, MD, MPH, Loren Winters, NP, and Kathy Blais, RN – are optimistic about the results thus far. Moy was alongside Taraschi’s many family members, friends and neighbors who attended the game and proudly watched her sing.

“As a lifelong Red Sox fan, performing the national anthem for a game was a dream come true,” says Taraschi. “The lyrics speak to the flag still standing after a long battle, and I am convinced that I, too, will be standing when my treatment is complete.”

A professional singer, Taraschi was selected to sing the anthem from scores of individuals who seek the honor each season. She began singing at age 15, studied voice at the University of Rochester’s Eastman School of Music and has performed live with jazz quartets, pianists and in musical comedy in Rochester, Philadelphia and Boston.

“My hopes for the future are to sing the national anthem again, record a CD, sing live with a big band and help other patients understand that their potential, dreams and hopes do not end with a diagnosis of cancer – mine didn’t.”

IN RECOGNITION OF the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, people across the nation and around the world paused in recent weeks to remember and honor the lives lost and forever changed that day. Members of the MGH community gathered with MGH Chaplaincy staff, Peter L. Slavin, MD, MGH president, and Jeanette Ives Erickson, RN, DNP, FAAN, senior vice president for Patient Care and chief nurse, to mark the anniversary with a remembrance service Sept. 9. The service began with Michael McElhinny, MDiv, Chaplaincy director, recounting the events of that fateful morning, interspersed with the sounding of a gong and the reading of Psalm 23 by members of the Chaplaincy.

The chaplains proceeded to light candles to the accompaniment of a harpist, and after an ecumenical prayer recited by Rev. Ann Haywood-Baxter, Slavin, Ives Erickson and McElhinny offered their reflections on the tragedy. Slavin focused on the message “when in distress every man becomes our neighbor,” that founding physicians John Collins Warren, MD, and James Jackson, MD, articulated as part of the MGH mission and described how the events of Sept. 11 only heightened the urgency of that message. Ives Erickson expanded on the theme of MGH’s readiness to rise to the occasion in any time of crisis.

McElhinny described his initial feelings – along with the rest of the chaplains – of shock and being overwhelmed, but recalled how quickly he and the entire hospital mobilized to respond to the unfolding events. He emphasized the need for all to focus on hope as a motivating force going forward.

After a final musical interlude, the chaplains offered a blessing together, and then, each in his or her own language, bade attendees to go in peace.

ONE DECADE LATER: Rev. Patti Keeler speaks to service attendees

MGH HOTLINE
Linda Kelly celebration of life
A celebration of the life of Linda Kelly, ANP-COHON-S, CM, will be held Sept. 20 at 2 pm in the O’Keeffe Auditorium. Kelly joined the MGH in 1969 as a staff nurse, holding many posts throughout her 41-year career, most recently as a nurse practitioner for the Occupational Health Service.

MGH Senior HealthWISE
MGH Senior HealthWISE is offering hypertension screenings Sept. 26 from 1:30 to 2:30 pm at the West End Library, 151 Cambridge St. Wellness nurse Diane Connor, MS, RN, CDE, will provide free blood pressure checks and information on healthy blood pressure. For more information, call 617-724-6756.

National Atrial Fibrillation (AF) Awareness Month
Heart Center physicians Jeremy Ruskin, MD, and Moussa Mansour, MD, will present at Cardiology Grand Rounds Sept. 21. Ruskin will present “A Practical Clinical Tool for the Assessment and Classification of Atrial Fibrillation Related Symptoms” followed by Mansour on “Catheter Ablation for Persistent AF – Patient Selection, Techniques, Results and Predictors of Success.” For more information, access www.massgeneral.org/atrialfibrillation.

Tobacco treatment retreat
The seventh annual tobacco treatment retreat will be held Sept. 28 from 8 am to 12:15 pm at the Colonnade Hotel at 120 Huntington Ave. The event is free of charge to Partners employees and sponsored by Partners HealthCare System clinical performance management. For more information or to register, contact Grace Bommarito at gbommarito@partners.org.

Fall prevention awareness
The MGH Collaborative Governance Fall Prevention Committee will host a booth Sept. 23, National Falls Prevention Awareness Day, from 10 am to 4 pm in the MGH Main Lobby. Information will be available for MGH patients, families and staff. For more information, contact Deborah D’Avolio, PhD, APRN-BC, at 617-643-4873 or Monica Staples, RN, MSN, at 617-726-3345.

MGH HOTLINE

Termeer
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José Baselga, MD, PhD, chief of Hematology/Oncology and associate director of the MGH Cancer Center, will lead the new Termeer Center, which will be located on the seventh floor of the Yawkey Center for Outpatient Care. The Termeer Center will feature a translational research program to speed the discovery and delivery of new targeted therapies to patients with early- and advanced-stage cancer, significantly expanding the number and range of clinical trials available to patients.

“This support will benefit patients and their loved ones for many years to come,” says Baselga. “We are tremendously excited about the new center and the pioneering work that will come out of it. The field of cancer care and research is in the midst of a sea change. There is so much hope we can offer with the possibilities of this new personalized approach. I find it especially inspiring to be at MGH, the place that is doing so much of the most important work in the field.”

The Termeers’ gift is one of the largest donations dedicated to cancer treatment in MGH history. For more information about the Henri and Belinda Termeer Center for Targeted Therapies, access www.massgeneral.org/targetedtherapy.

Women in Medicine Month event
The MGH Office for Women’s Careers, Multicultural Affairs Office and Human Resources will present “Honoring the Past, Defining the Future: Women in Medicine in the 21st Century” Sept. 22 from noon to 1:30 pm as part of its monthlong celebration of Women in Medicine. Registration is required. MGH faculty with HMS appointments may contact womens.careers@partners.org to register.

Collins
(Continued from page 4)
The presentation was studded with examples from specific NIH projects, including the Cancer Genome Atlas, which aims to catalog genetic mutations responsible for cancer; initiatives to explore the use of existing compounds “repurposed” to treat other diseases; and efforts to make the most of the Clinical and Translational Science Awards consortium, a network of clinical and translational NIH grant recipients at 60 sites in 30 states and the District of Columbia, including the Harward Catalyst program.

Collins also described his proposal for a new center that would focus on the frustrating process of developing new cancer drugs. The process, according to Collins, currently takes about 14 years and has a failure rate of 98 percent. Likewise, Collins pointed to the preclinical trial phase, sometimes known among researchers as “the valley of death,” where animal testing to determine drug toxicity is the most common reason for drug failure. “It doesn’t work that well. Is there a better way?” he asked. His answer is yes, and the NIH is hard at work exploring ways it might be done.

Last but not least, Collins stressed the importance of supporting early-stage clinical investigators and identifying ways to increase the diversity of the scientific community. “We take these issues very seriously,” he noted.

Collins ended his talk by describing research – some of which is in progress here at the MGH – on the rare but debilitating disease called progeria, which causes the rapid acceleration of aging in children. While the disease may be extremely rare, knowledge about normal aging and general health that the work is developing is both exciting and extremely useful, said Collins. It is a point, he noted, that the public needs to understand.

“So be bold,” he told the assembled researchers. “Be innovative. And try some wacky ideas from time to time – we at NIH like to see that!”