Survey: Half of Cancer Researchers Report Their Work is on Hold

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A survey of American Cancer Society grantees finds more than half report their cancer research has been halted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The American Cancer Society reached out to all of its funded researchers to assess the state of their projects and collect information to guide its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In early April 2020, the ACS sent a survey out to 744 current grantees via e-mail; 488 grantees responded, yielding a 66% response rate.

Among the survey's findings:

In response to: Are you currently working primarily from home or teleworking due to the COVID-19 pandemic?, the survey found a high proportion of grantees are working remotely all or most of the time.

- 54% were working entirely remotely
- 32% were working mostly remotely with occasional in-person visits to office/campus/lab
- 8% were working mostly or entirely in their normal work setting (6% in a clinical setting; 2% in a research setting)

In response to: How has your institution responded to the pandemic?

- 91% reported only essential personnel were allowed
- 59% reported their institution had closed laboratories
- 57% reported their institution had temporarily halted research
- 4% reported their institution remained entirely open

In response to: What has been the impact on your research or training?

- 51% indicate a high impact; all research or training activities are paused until further notice
- 43% report a modest impact; some aspects are paused
- 7% report a low impact; research or training continues as planned

“It is abundantly clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is having a major impact on cancer research,” said William C. Phelps, PhD, American Cancer Society senior vice president of Extramural Research. “In some labs queried for our survey, all non-essential research had been halted, with research on COVID-19 being the only type of research being encouraged. In addition to the deceleration in progress against cancer, these laboratories and institutions will face significant additional costs associated with restarting the cancer research enterprise in the coming months.”

Despite the significant impact of closed laboratories, many researchers have found it a unique opportunity. Susanne Warner, MD, is an ACS grantee investigating the use of viruses to infect and destroy colorectal cancer cells at City of Hope in Duarte, California. “Despite being at home a lot more than usual, we’ve been able to be really productive in the lab,” said Warner. “We’re taking this opportunity to review a lot of our old data to see if there were messages that the science was trying to send us that we didn’t have time to stop and listen to before. We’re also using the time to plan new experiments so that when all this is over, we can hit the ground running.”

To accommodate the temporary closing of many research labs, the American Cancer Society will delay the start date of its next round of grants from July 1, 2020 to September 1, 2020.

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