

Cancer survivor applauds 'moonshot' initiative



Dr. Marc Rappaport, an oncologist at Crystal Run Healthcare in Newburgh, said Friday that finding a single cure for cancer is unrealistic because the disease has hundreds of variations. He would like to see the "moonshot" initiative focus on research, prevention, targeted therapies and early detection. KELLY MARSH/FOR THE TIMES HERALD-RECORD

Obama outlined plan to find a cure during State of the Union

By Hema Easley
Times Herald-Record

As a 20-year survivor of lymphoma who now helps others battling cancer, Casey MacDonald closely follows developments in research and drug therapies.

So she was delighted when she heard President Barack Obama call for a "moonshot" effort to cure cancer during the State of the Union address this week.

"We think the initiative will have a huge impact on patients and their relatives," said MacDonald, who now leads the Hudson Valley Cancer Resource Center in Montgomery. "They are going to put the same amount of money, resources and effort into finding a cure for cancer that they put into landing a man on the moon."

In his address Tuesday, Obama

put Vice President Joe Biden in charge of the national endeavor. The assignment has a personal resonance for Biden because he lost his 46-year-old son, Beau, to brain cancer in May.

"For the loved ones we've all lost, for the family we can still save, let's make America the country that cures cancer once and for all," Obama said to applause from both sides of the aisle.

Congress has already approved \$260 million in additional funding to the National Institutes of Health for cancer research, and the administration will push for more. Biden has said he will aim to coordinate efforts across government, the private sector, researchers, physicians, patients and philanthropies to speed progress.

Cancer remains the No. 2 killer in America even as the death rate has dropped by 23 percent since 1991. According to the American Cancer Society, there will be 1.7 million new cases of cancer in

2016 and nearly 600,000 deaths.

But researchers and physicians say there has never been a better time than now to tackle the disease because of promising advances in immunotherapy, which uses the immune system to attack tumors, and "precision medicine," which personalizes treatments based on the genetic makeup of a patient's tumors.

"We've come a long way," said Marc Rappaport, an oncologist at Crystal Run Healthcare. "There are cancers that were death sentences two, three years ago. Now people can look forward to several years" of life.

But, he cautioned, cancer is a disease like no other because it has hundreds of variations and hundreds of thousands of pathways, making a single cure unrealistic. To find a cure, he said, every individual's DNA would have to be mapped and their genetic mutations identified and then modified.

Instead of focusing on a cure, Rappaport said, the initiative

should emphasize research, prevention, targeted therapies and early detection. Allowing more people into clinical trials and making drugs more affordable would help make a dent, he said.

Brooke Evans, a Monroe potter battling stage four breast cancer, said that while she welcomes the initiative, she has yet to hear any large organization, whether the government or pharmaceutical companies, talk about prevention.

"I directly see an epidemic of cancer in this country being a result of how we live and what we eat. The toxic load that is present in our world is incredible," said Evans, who receives targeted chemotherapy. "Why isn't the government speaking to that? It's looking at cancer as something that comes out of nowhere. To look at one without the other doesn't make sense."

Hope Nemiroff, executive director of Breast Cancer Options, a Kingston nonprofit, said that with the mapping of the human genome, a cure for cancer isn't

Biden seeks cooperation

In launching his initiative Friday to hasten a cure for cancer, Vice



Biden

President Joe Biden said he would use his final year in office to break down barriers in the medical world he says are holding

back progress on eradicating the dreaded disease.

Meeting with scientists, Biden recalled his grandfather's adage that the world has three kinds of politics: church politics, labor politics and regular politics.

"I hope you're not offended, but there are four kinds of politics in America. There's cancer politics," Biden said in Philadelphia.

Biden said he has found a medical community rife with competition, territorialism and "stove-piping" of information that's left researchers and their discoveries cloistered in their own corners. His campaign this year will work to encourage more data-sharing about patient data and treatment outcomes.

"My hope is that I can be a catalyst, to oversimplify it, to get everybody on the same page," Biden said.

—The Associated Press

far away. The federal money for cancer research would help, she said, but there are still obstacles.

"The president has great intentions," said Nemiroff. "But I'm afraid that Congress will put blocks on his path just because. Let's see if this (money) stays in the budget next year."

MacDonald was more optimistic about the success of the moonshot effort after seeing improvement in therapies.

"It's a disease that sneaks up on you, cuts you at the knees, and leaves you gasping for air," said MacDonald.

With genome mapping and more research, she said, "everyone coming next will have a better shot at having a better life."

—The Associated Press contributed to this report.