

Playing It Safe in Cancer Research

Grant Money Goes to Projects Unlikely to Break Much Ground

By GINA KOLATA

Among the recent research grants awarded by the National Cancer Institute is one for a study asking whether people who are especially responsive to good-tasting food have the most difficulty staying on a diet. Another study will assess a Web-based program that encourages families to choose more healthful foods.

Many other grants involve biological research unlikely to break new ground. For example, one project asks whether a laboratory discovery involving colon cancer also applies to breast cancer. But even if it does apply, there is no treatment yet that exploits it.

The cancer institute has spent \$105 billion since President Richard M. Nixon declared war on the disease in 1971. The American Cancer Society, the largest private financer of cancer research, has spent about \$3.4 billion on research grants since 1946.

Yet the fight against cancer is going slower than most had hoped, with only small changes in the death rate in the almost 40 years since it began.

One major impediment, scientists agree, is the grant system itself. It has become a sort of jobs program, a way to keep

FORTY YEARS' WAR

The Cautious Path



BRYCE VICKMARK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Dr. Ewa T. Sicinska turned to a private foundation to finance her research.

research laboratories going year after year with the understanding that the focus will be on small projects unlikely to take significant steps toward curing cancer.

"These grants are not silly, but they are only likely to produce incremental progress," said Dr. Robert C. Young, chancellor at Fox Chase Cancer Center in Phil-

adelphia and chairman of the Board of Scientific Advisors, an independent group that makes recommendations to the cancer institute.

The institute's reviewers choose such projects because, with too little money to finance most proposals, they are timid about taking chances on ones that might not succeed. The problem, Dr. Young and others say, is that projects that could make a major difference in cancer prevention and treatment are all too often crowded out because they are too uncertain. In fact, it has become lore among cancer researchers that some game-changing discoveries involved projects deemed too unlikely to succeed and were therefore denied federal grants, forcing researchers to struggle mightily to continue.

Take one transformative drug, for breast cancer. It was based on a discovery by Dr. Dennis Slamon of the University of California, Los Angeles, that very aggressive breast cancers often have multiple copies of a particular protein, HER-2. That led to the development of herceptin, which blocks HER-2.

Now women with excess HER-2 proteins, who once had the worst breast can-

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