

The Fight Goes on

Cancer Treatment and Research during a Global Pandemic

It's hard enough to research a disease such as cancer, whose complexities and variations are as diverse as there are individuals diagnosed with it, in the best of times. Add to that the global pandemic of COVID-19, and things might just seem impossible. The pandemic has given many of us insight about what it might be like to have cancer, by introducing us to the very real fear of contracting something from which we might die.

We are left to wonder about how it is affecting those actually fighting the disease. For more insight on what the pandemic means to cancer treatment and research, we reached out to some of our Tower grant recipients and asked them the following questions.

Interviewed for this article were Richard Pietras, MD, PhD, 2015 Tower Senior Investigator Grant recipient from UCLA, Joshua P. Sasine, MD, PhD, 2017 Tower Career Development Grant recipient from UCLA, and Soo Park, MD, 2019 Tower Career Development Grant recipient From UCSD.

What does it mean to be a researcher in the age of COVID?

Richard Pietras, MD - Early in the pandemic, many of us were asked to isolate at home, and this led to many disruptions in routine medical care as well as in laboratory and clinical trials research. At UCLA, many research laboratories were shuttered except for essential work and services. At present, a gradual ramp-up of research laboratory work is underway, but significant delays in research projects and selected clinical trials have occurred. The path forward will depend in large part on progress in the management of Covid-19 in our communities. As a medical researcher, it is notable that the Covid-19 pandemic has also served to

highlight significant health disparities afflicting underserved and minority populations in our communities. Investigation of such disparities is also ongoing to better understand cancer health disparities that occur in these same populations.

Joshua P. Sasine, MD - Due to the need for social distancing, COVID has set cancer research back quite a bit. On average, most labs have lost at least 3 months of progress. That may not seem like that much but when you consider how many researchers there are, this is a large impact.

Is there anything you'd like to share about how COVID is affecting cancer treatment/prevention?

Dr. Pietras - During the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a distressing reduction in the number of routine patient visits to clinics and a corresponding decrease in cancer screenings and cancer diagnosis. Recent reports indicate that there has been a sharp decline in the number of newly identified patients with six common types of cancers since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is troublesome going forward because early detection and management of cancers helps to significantly improve cancer survival. It is important for patients to know that most hospitals have now resumed routine patient care and have introduced strict protocols to protect patient safety.

Dr. Park - As a cancer researcher in the age of COVID, I have found it very helpful to focus on my work as it gives me meaning. Despite the challenges and setbacks, this pandemic has given me greater purpose and determination to pursue cancer research. Continuing cancer research is vital because cancer does not stop in the face of a pandemic. I am very proud to say that COVID has not stopped my institution from conducting robust cancer research. Nor has it stopped us from offering novel therapies on clinical trials. The most important thing is that we conduct cancer research and offer novel therapies in a completely safe manner which we know we can do.

What has the Tower funding meant to you and your career?

Richard Pietras, MD - I was honored to serve as a Senior Investigator Awardee from the Tower Cancer Research Foundation - Jessica M. Berman Memorial Fund. This award helped to fund the discovery of a new approach to manage advanced breast cancer and

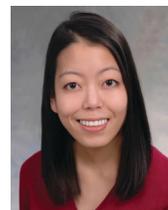
promote the long-term survival of patients afflicted with this disease. Helping women fight this disease is a fitting tribute to the memory of Jessica M. Berman.

Joshua P. Sasine, MD - The Tower funding enabled me to do key experiments which launched the next phase of my research career. From there, I was able to secure a career development award from the National Cancer Institute of the NIH. That led to my most recent milestone: a faculty position at Cedars-Sinai with 90% protected research time, generous startup funds, and my own laboratory space. The original momentum came from the Tower award.

Dr. Park - I am honored to be a recipient of Tower funding. Cancer survivors treated with certain types of chemotherapy are at risk for developing aggressive blood cancers. My research focuses on developing strategies to mitigate this risk, and we are studying how a common diabetic drug may work in this setting. Tower funding has provided critical support as we progress towards the discovery of a safe and effective preventative therapy.



*Richard Pietras,
MD, PhD, UCSD*



*Soo Park,
MD, UCLA*



*Joshua P. Sasine,
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