NIH Chief: Cuts Put Vital Medical Research at Risk

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Better cancer drugs that zero in on a tumor with fewer side effects. A universal flu vaccine that could fight every strain of influenza without needing a yearly shot.

Research into potentially life-saving products like these will be delayed and newer discoveries shelved if Congress can't avert impending budget cuts that the director of the National Institutes of Health warns will have far-reaching effects.

"All diseases will feel the consequences, I'm afraid," Dr. Francis Collins told The Associated Press.

"We're in this amazing revolution," Collins added. The faster promising leads are funded, "the more lives are saved."

The NIH, the leading funder of biomedical research, will lose $1.6 billion this year, about 5.1 percent of its budget, if automatic cuts go through next month. Collins said.

That means hundreds of medical research projects around the country may go unfunded, while multi-year projects already under way could be scaled back. The ripple effect, Collins said: About 20,000 jobs nationwide could be lost in university and other research laboratories nationwide.

NIH's budget hasn't kept pace with inflation over the past decade, resulting in what Collins calculates is a 20 percent erosion in the agency's buying power during a time of unprecedented scientific discovery. A decade ago, NIH was funding about 1 in every 3 grant applications. Today that's dropped to 1 in 6, before the upcoming cuts.

President Barack Obama argued the economic value of preserving medical research in his State of the Union address, saying every dollar the government invested to map the human genome returned $140 to the economy.

Other health impacts from the planned cuts, as outlined in a letter to lawmakers by Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius:

—Health departments will give 424,000 fewer tests for the AIDS virus this year.

—About 7,400 fewer HIV patients will be able to get life-saving medication through the AIDS Drug Assistance Program.

—The Food and Drug Administration will conduct 2,100 fewer inspections of food manufacturing firms this year.

—More than 373,000 seriously ill people may not receive needed mental health services.

Also, Medicare is slated for a 2 percent cut in payments to service providers. Hospitals and popular private insurance plans through Medicare Advantage and the prescription drug plan will feel the biggest impact. They will be reimbursed at 98 cents to the dollar for services to Medicare beneficiaries.

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