

What is Past is Prologue



Margaret Anderson

Executive Director
FasterCures

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When you look around the biomedical research landscape today, evidence of game-changing innovation is everywhere. I joined *FasterCures* over 10 years ago, and it was different then. Our first map of the obstacles to progress in medical research was long, and we were all quite expert at wringing our hands and reciting the obstacles.

What changed?

One thing is that evidence of change in other sectors is abundant. In just over 11 years, Facebook has more than 1 billion users worldwide. Seven years ago, we saw the first iPhone launched. Almost one-third of Internet users worldwide watch YouTube videos every day now, another technology introduced just a

decade ago. We remember what life was like before all of this, but new generations will never know what life used to be like—when you carried coins to make a call on a street corner, or you wrote long letters to stay in touch and exchanged hard copy photographs, or you watched slides of vacations or home movies with your family on Saturday night.

The innovation in connectivity sweeping the world is showing us a path forward. That and just plain bold, disruptive, and tenacious efforts by everyone in the system. Much remains to be done. Consider that there are more than 10,000 known diseases affecting our world today, and we have viable treatments for only 500 of them.

In the past decade, we've become adept at digesting best practices and extracting lessons learned. Sharing has gotten a whole lot easier, and we recognized it was vitally necessary. One case study for reflection is how the globe responded to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the early 1990s, I worked on HIV/AIDS policy. I convened a meeting on the Social Security disability definition and the inclusion of some new conditions so people living with them could receive much needed benefits. Few treatment options were available, and HIV/AIDS was the number one cause of death for U.S. men ages 25 to 44 years old. Early on in our meeting, ACT-UP demonstrators arrived and handcuffed themselves to some of my meeting participants. Once they felt secure that the outcome was headed in the right direction, the demonstrators joined in and took off the handcuffs. At the beginning of that meeting, I was terrified. Now, I am humbled by the passion and vigilance to their cause. We currently have more than two dozen treatments for HIV/AIDS, and we can thank the activism that we saw during that time period for showing a path forward.

My recipe for our innovation-oriented future includes a liberal dose of attitude and questioning the status quo. Going first means you may feel lonely or take some hits, but you'll get there. Look at the Cystic Fibrosis

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Foundation journey with the drug discovery process that led to the drug Kalydeco. The team knocked on many doors until they found one that was ready for what they had to offer. The recipe includes a big dollop of inquisitiveness—you need to learn from others who have gone before you. No need to reinvent the wheel and waste time. We see this every day in our TRAIN program among the venture philanthropy groups that would much rather teach another group what worked and didn't than see anyone waste time or money. The recipe calls for flexibility. The venture philanthropy community has needed to pivot from an exclusive focus on de-risking the science to one that includes that plus strategies to define value to the patients they serve so they can get approved therapies in their hands, and strategies to define what patient preferences look like in their community.

Progress in biomedical research is swift indeed, but there are some twists and turns ahead that will require some serious leaning in. Pricing is the topic du jour, and the question of how to accommodate new innovation into a healthcare system undergoing massive change is complex. The science of patient input is revving its engines, but these are early days, and collaborative solutions are needed. And in the U.S., resources for the NIH and FDA need to be bolstered so that discoveries today can turn into treatments and cures down the road.

FasterCures and our colleagues in the medical research system are more focused than ever on bringing innovative ideas, strategic capital, and disruptive thinkers together to transform the system so that every disease and every patient can benefit. Let's point to the past but focus on the future.

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