

---

## Better Health Care Through Research

Mary Woolley, President,  
Research!America  
1101 King Street, Suite 250  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
[www.researchamerica.org](http://www.researchamerica.org)

Research!America is dedicated to heightening America's commitment to health research. In support of our mission, I speak regularly to practicing researchers and clinicians about the challenges of meeting public and policy maker expectations in the face of limited resources. I am invariably struck in these conversations by the optimistic and entrepreneurial spirit of people who are dedicated to improving health. Can this spirit be sustained in the face of current challenges? A variety of approaches are being discussed around the nation. Given this critical moment for the health care system, I propose that all health research—including health services research—be given the chance to deliver on its promise.

The American public wants research to succeed. This simple fact means that despite the many questions they have, the public supports the people and organizations who conduct research, and they support and trust the clinicians who deliver the new cures, better treatments and effective prevention strategies. As the Research!America alliance works to communicate the challenges as well as the promises of research, we keep a finger on the pulse of public opinion. At the same time, and necessarily, we endeavor to remain informed about the difficult choices facing elected officials and the public. Escalating health care costs, the obesity epidemic, health disparities, an aging society, access to health care, public health infrastructure weaknesses, and pointed questions about the accountability of health and research-based institutions are high on policy makers' radar screens even as they near the top of the list of public concerns.

A recent nationwide *PARADE*/Research!America public opinion poll asked respondents to identify their top health concerns.<sup>1</sup> Cancer and heart disease took top spots on the list, as they have for the 12 years Research!America has been commissioning polls. Rising steadily in the past few years and now among the top issues are obesity as well as cost and access concerns pertaining to health care. In addition, people in this election year say that increased funding for research to prevent and cure disease and disability ranks as high as concerns about the economy and education when deciding which candidates will get their vote.<sup>2</sup> These and other poll data demonstrate that stronger support for research and its prompt, cost-effective translation to practice is a winning issue for policy makers.

Thanks to strong investment in research by both the public and private sectors over the past half-century, Americans are living longer and healthier lives. Yet enormous challenges remain. Even with significant advances achieved as a result of our nation's investment in research, *more than 4,200 Americans still die every day* of five major diseases: heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes and Alzheimer's disease.<sup>3</sup> This translates to more than 1.55 million deaths every year—more than all American combat deaths from the Revolution to the war in Iraq. Add to this sobering reality the observation of Dr. Carolyn Clancy, director of the Agency for Health Research and Quality (AHRQ): "We pay for and receive excellent care one-third of the time, unnecessary care one-third of the time, and one-third of the time our care is characterized by mistakes, errors or under-use of clinically appropriate treatments."<sup>4</sup> How much longer will it be until the public demands change in these equations?

We live at a time when world events—including international conflict, acts of terrorism, natural catastrophes and medical advances as well as failures—are brought to us in real time. Translation of research to patient care does not, however, take place instantaneously. Even as information technology has heightened public attention to how research may lead to cures for diabetes and cancers, the elimination of Alzheimer's disease and AIDS,

---

and the prevention of heart disease and stroke, the public finds it very difficult to interpret a medical advance—does it apply to me, my family, our community? How does it compare to current therapeutic or preventive recommendations? What are the cost implications? Is research moving as quickly as it can?

Health services research designed to help patients and clinicians answer questions about evolving treatment options is sorely needed. Health services research is also needed to address *and answer* national policy challenges such as how to moderate the crushing financial and health implications of an aging society, how to design and put information technology to work effectively across current systems, how to address gaps in clinical research, how to shore up our tattered public health infrastructure and how to reinvent a system of patient care based on valuing quality.

It is past time to recognize that we as a nation have seriously undervalued the potential of health services research. We spend only about a dollar per year per American for health services research funded by the AHRQ.<sup>5</sup> No credible case can be made for such a paltry investment, considering we spend close to \$5,000 per year on health care for each person living in the United States today.<sup>6</sup> Ninety-four percent of Americans tell us that they value research to improve the health care system.<sup>7</sup> What are we waiting for? Clinicians, researchers and patients must take that message to elected officials and other decision makers who can take steps to provide critically needed support for health services research.

Increased access to and knowledge about therapy options and outcomes will inspire both clinician and patient confidence in the American health care system. When more policy makers understand that not only can biomedical and behavioral research lead to new cures, treatments and effective preventions, but in addition, health services research can lead to answers for our nation's most pressing health care policy challenges, the necessary resources will follow. The benefits will be improved individual health of American citizens, increased attraction of the best and the brightest to careers in research and clinical care, and a robust health care system for our nation.

*For more information about Research!America, visit [www.researchamerica.org](http://www.researchamerica.org).*

---

<sup>1</sup> "Taking Our Pulse: The PARADE/Research!America Health Poll" conducted by Charlton Research Company, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Research!America National Poll on Health Research conducted by Charlton Research Company, 2004

<sup>3</sup> *The National Institutes of Health: Impact of the President's FY2005 Budget on Medical Research*, report by the Campaign for Medical Research, 2004

<sup>4</sup> *The Search for Quality and Value in Health Care: Implications for Medical Technology*, Medical Technology Leadership Forum, February 2004

<sup>5</sup> FY 2004 Consolidated Appropriations Act

<sup>6</sup> Cutler, D. M., *Your Money or Your Life: Strong Medicine for America's Health Care System*, Oxford University Press, 2004

<sup>7</sup> Research!America National Poll on Health Research conducted by Charlton Research Company, 2004