

*End suffering, death from cancer by 2015*

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## **Realistic goal: End suffering, death from cancer by 2015**

*By Andrew C. von Eschenbach*

Devoting your professional life to fighting cancer does not ensure that you will avoid having to battle it personally - as I well know.

In 1989, I was diagnosed with melanoma, a form of skin cancer. Three years ago, I received another diagnosis: prostate cancer. And just a few months ago, I was diagnosed with basal cell carcinoma, yet another form of cancer. Each diagnosis was difficult for me, but with a caring medical team and my family's support, I remain among the millions of Americans who are cancer survivors.

While my personal battles with cancer have been successful, I am also intimately familiar with many lost battles. For nearly three decades, as a urologic oncologist treating prostate-cancer patients, I witnessed firsthand the pain and suffering and sometimes, tragically, death. And I saw it with my father - one of the most courageous cancer patients I knew - who lost a five-year struggle with prostate cancer in a battle that sometimes stripped him of his dignity. This year, more than 563,000 additional Americans are expected to die from all forms of cancer, according to a report released last week by the American Cancer Society ([news](#) - [web sites](#)).

But as my own experience shows, cancer is no longer an automatic death sentence. We have made tremendous progress against this disease, and people increasingly are living with cancer rather than dying from it. Strides in research and cancer technology, plus increased resources, give us an opportunity for exponential progress against the disease.

That's why those of us at the National Cancer Institute ([news](#) - [web sites](#))

*End suffering, death from cancer by 2015*

(NCI), part of the federal government's National Institutes of Health ([news - web sites](#)), have a new goal: to eliminate suffering and death due to cancer by 2015.

**Enemy will not disappear**

We are not saying that we will "cure" or eliminate all cancer. Rather, we aim to pre-empt the worst outcomes of the disease: We will prevent more cancer; we will detect many more cancers earlier and eliminate them with fewer side effects; and we will modulate the aggressiveness of cancer so that people live with, but do not die from, the disease.

My announcement of this goal encountered determined skepticism. Many people have questioned why I set a firm deadline on something so monumental. Some even suggest the idea is scientifically unrealistic.

**Huge scientific strides**

But I believe we soon can end the suffering and death caused by this disease because:

- Cancer is no longer mysterious and invulnerable.

Research has helped us unlock more of the mysteries of the process of cancer, giving us new insights about how to exploit cancer's vulnerabilities. We know more about a person's susceptibility to cancer - the genetic and molecular events that result in a cell becoming malignant and the factors that determine the behavior of a cancer, including how it spreads and kills. Each of the steps in the process is being addressed not by a "magic bullet," but by a strategy to prevent, detect, eliminate or control the cancer process.

- We already have made great progress in increasing the number of people who are cancer survivors, not death statistics.

When the National Cancer Act expanded NCI's responsibilities in 1971, there were 3 million U.S. cancer survivors. Today, there are about 10 million.

- The pace of scientific progress, fueled by the wonders of new technology, is

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accelerating.

Today's Einsteins have laptop computers, not blackboards. Cancer research is backed by amazing developments in many scientific fields, from imaging that allows us to monitor processes such as blood flow and oxygen consumption to supercomputers that use artificial intelligence and miniaturized technology that allows us to investigate biological systems.

Like myself, one in two men and one in three women in the United States will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime. The elimination of suffering and death from those cancers may seem like a dream to some, but I believe our dreams are a vision of a future reality. Well-funded, brilliant cancer researchers, armed with today's incredible technologies, will help us be ready by 2015.

*Andrew C. von Eschenbach, M.D., has been director of the National Cancer Institute, the nation's principal agency for cancer research and training, since January 2002.*