

December 6, 2023

Monica Bertagnolli, M.D.  
Director  
National Institutes of Health  
9000 Rockville Pike  
Bethesda, MD 20892

Dear Dr. Bertagnolli,

Congratulations on your confirmation as the Director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The [Society of Gynecologic Oncology](#) (SGO) is excited and looks forward to working with you in your new role.

SGO is the premier medical specialty society for health care professionals trained in the comprehensive management of gynecologic cancers. Our membership is comprised of over 2,700 physicians, nurses, and other advanced practice providers that represent an entire oncology team dedicated to the treatment and care of patients with gynecologic cancers. In addition to our society, the [Foundation for Women's Cancer](#) is dedicated to increasing public awareness of gynecologic cancer risk awareness, prevention, early detection, and optimal treatment.

SGO's mission is to improve the care of women with gynecologic cancers by encouraging research and disseminating knowledge, raising the standards of practice in the prevention and treatment of gynecologic malignancies, and collaborating with other organizations interested in women's health care, oncology, and related fields. Ultimately, our vision is to eradicate gynecologic cancers.

As you are likely aware, it is estimated that over 114,000 women would be diagnosed with a gynecologic cancer and more than 34,000 would die in 2023. The incidence of gynecologic cancers is increasing, and we are seeing stark health care disparities and disproportionate impacts on our most vulnerable and minority populations. Significant advances have been made in the field of gynecologic oncology, through research and collaboration with patients eager to be involved. However, there is still much more work to do to improve prevention, early detection, and treatment of these devastating diseases. NIH is positioned to play a key role to support advances in these areas. This is why the SGO is committed to ensuring that NIH has the necessary resources and support to maintain its role as a transparent, nimble, and forward-thinking institution, allowing it to continue pioneering research and addressing the evolving healthcare needs of all Americans.

As you well know, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and payer status continue to play an outsized role in people's health outcomes and the disparities that persist in the patient population our members treat. One way to address these disparities is to ensure people from diverse backgrounds who have a cancer diagnosis participate in clinical trials. SGO applauds your recent call to focus on strategies to increase clinical trial enrollment. Strict clinical trial requirements and the complexity of clinical trial participation are barriers that affect the racial, cultural, ethnic, economic, and geographic diversity of clinical trial enrollment. They also limit the representativeness of the clinical trial results, forcing clinicians to speculate as to whether the results can be extrapolated to their real-world patients. SGO looks forward to partnering with you to help NIH improve clinical trial diversity and optimize enrollment of diverse populations that truly represent all patients.

Health disparities in gynecologic cancers are growing. The burden of cervical cancer, which is vaccine preventable, is highest among Hispanic women who have the highest incidence, followed by non-Hispanic

American Indian and Alaska Native women, and Black women.<sup>1</sup> The incidence of endometrial cancer is growing so rapidly that it is expected to be the third most common cancer among women and fourth leading cause of women's deaths by 2040; the mortality rate is increasing more quickly among Asian, Hispanic, and Black women.<sup>2</sup> Disparities in ovarian cancer, which is already one of the most lethal cancers among women, are present and understudied **with worse survival rates among non-Hispanic Black women compared to other racial/ethnic groups.**<sup>3</sup> **Given the health care disparities in gynecologic cancers, SGO supports initiatives by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) to close to research gaps concerning health care disparities.**

**Besides studying and reducing disparities in gynecologic cancers, NIH can help improve health equity by supporting diversity in agency leadership positions and the physician-scientist workforce.** Thus, SGO supports NIH increasing the diversity of leadership teams, selection committees, and fellowship placements by having accountable goals related to hiring, promotion and retention, and bridging community and academic partnerships. Additionally, SGO sees an opportunity for NIH to create pipeline programs for underrepresented minorities that offer research mentorship and insight into grant processes and funding mechanism. Prioritizing a diverse workforce and pipeline programs will help combat health care disparities not only in gynecologic cancers, but also address health disparities in research and other activities.

**There is an urgent public health need to better understand and prevent gynecologic cancers, which only research can solve.** We look forward to working with you to improve the health of people with gynecologic cancers and will be following up to request a meeting to discuss these issues in greater detail.

Sincerely,



Angeles Alvarez Secord, MD, MHSc  
President, 2023-2024

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gis.cdc.gov/Cancer/USCS/#/Demographics/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37963369/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32241384/>