It started with a phone call.

Gregory Simon was contacted by Steve Richetti, the chief of staff for Vice President Joe Biden, regarding a new project being launched at the White House called the Cancer Moonshot.

Richetti was gauging Simon’s interest in running the initiative. Biden was looking for someone who knew how to operate in the White House and had a strong understanding of cancer politics. Simon met those qualifications, as he previously served as an aide to Vice President Al Gore from 1991 to 1997 and had private sector experience launching the “action tank” FasterCures for Mike Milken and working as senior vice president for patient engagement at Pfizer.

Simon was asked to meet with Biden a few weeks later, but he had a follow-up appointment with his oncologist in New York. Simon had recently finished chemotherapy for chronic lymphocytic leukemia. When he called his doctor to let him know he received a call from Biden about this meeting his physician advised him “what are you thinking?! Go see Biden and reschedule the appointment.”
Simon then conferred with his wife about taking on this role, who encouraged him to do it. He officially became the executive director of the Cancer Moonshot starting March 2016. He worked with the Vice President on accomplishments like creating an archive of patient data using Amazon’s cloud computing software, an initiative hosting relevant clinical data and other information to help create liquid biopsies, as well as a program between the Department of Veteran Affairs and Department of Energy on improving treatments for veterans.

The work Simon did under the White House will continue via the Biden Cancer Initiative (BCI), which spun off from the Biden Foundation on June 26th of this year.

A “catalytic” organization

Simon, now president of BCI, told Drug Discovery & Development the organization would be structured as a non-profit with 10 million dollars in funding for the next two years.

“We’re not trying to be a think tank,” said Simon noting that there are already numerous institutions and conferences around the country providing people with information about certain diseases.

He referred to the BCI more as a “catalytic organization,” which essentially means the BCI is focused on kick-starting changes aimed at reducing disparities in cancer outcomes and expediting progress in cancer prevention, diagnosis, research, and care.

“Our strategy is to perform research to find the best solutions to problems we want to focus on and then identify the ideal way to make those solutions a reality,” Simon explained.

The responsibilities break down this way: Simon’s team looks for the best ways to make needed changes in the culture of cancer research and care. Then key leaders who need to adopt those changes will meet with Vice President Biden and his wife Dr. Jill Biden to determine how best to make the changes happen.

Some ideas that he mentioned included enabling better access to lifesaving therapies for people who are economically disadvantaged and constructing ways to improve clinical trial design and recruitment, but creating better techniques for data sharing is currently the priority.

“There isn’t a nationwide system that creates a uniform approach to prevent data from falling through the cracks. There are small networks like CancerlinQ that share information, but there are no guidelines that make these practices ubiquitous and standard,” elaborated Simon.

Simon told Drug Discovery & Development he’s confident they can build a robust data sharing network by working with cancer societies, major cancer research centers, and electronic medical record companies to build upon existing infrastructure instead of starting from scratch. A potential network like this could break down traditional barriers when it comes publishing studies and sharing information between organizations. This will help patients diagnosed with cancer from all different backgrounds gain immediate insight into what’s going on with certain treatments.

“We need to look at what is scaleable and implement streamlined strategies with experts when it comes to reducing the complexity,” he said regarding any barriers for quickly accessing medical information and other data.

Simon noted a good comparison to this project would be the original Internet where there were multiple sub-networks such as DARPANet and NSFNet that eventually merged into the Internet as we know it.

“It’s about culture, not money,” Simon told us when we asked about overcoming potential obstacles that could hinder this progress.

“All cultures are entrenched, but they do change. Taxi and hotel cultures are prime examples of industries with entrenched beliefs that got disrupted by new entrants. Gatekeepers are from days gone by. So much of what we do in medicine could become faster, quicker, and cheaper,” he elaborated.
Ultimately, he said the job of the BCI is to overcome these barriers. Biden has previously described it as the need to bring a sense of urgency to changing the culture of the cancer research enterprise.

“We have the greatest respect for the cancer research community, but they are in a system that makes it hard for them to combat this disease. It’s our goal to work with the cancer research community to make it easier for people who are devoted to their cause,” said Simon. “We want to do everything we can to make life better.”

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Ryan Bushey

Digital Editor

@R_Bushey

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