

**TESTIMONY OF  
MR. STEVE COOK OF HUNTSVILLE, AL  
PANCREATIC CANCER ACTION NETWORK  
(PanCAN)**

**TO THE SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON AGING  
FIELD HEARING  
“PANCREATIC CANCER: FIGHTING THE WORLD’S TOUGHEST  
CANCER IN ALABAMA AND NATIONALLY”**

**BIRMINGHAM, AL  
NOVEMBER 15, 2019**

Senator Jones, on behalf of the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network, PanCAN, I want to thank you for convening this field hearing today to highlight pancreatic cancer and the importance of federal support for pancreatic cancer research. My name is Steve Cook and I am your constituent. I am here today because my first wife Marqueta died from pancreatic cancer and I am also representing the entire pancreatic cancer community, including pancreatic cancer patients, families and researchers from across the country. PanCAN is a leading patient advocacy organization focused on pancreatic cancer with a goal to dramatically improve patient outcomes.

When Marqueta was diagnosed with stage IV pancreatic cancer in June of 2017, my family and I were dumfounded. We quickly realized this was going to be the fight of her life. As an engineer – I like to solve problems and I knew I needed to learn more about this terrible disease, so I reached out to several resources, including PanCAN. As she continued to battle the disease, and we began learning more about pancreatic cancer, I realized that funding for research was a challenge. Recognizing that one of the strongest weapons we have in fighting the disease is federal research funding, Marqueta encouraged me to take the message to our leaders in Washington, D.C. I attended my first PanCAN Advocacy Day in 2018, about two weeks after she passed away, just 12 months after her initial diagnosis. Truth be told, I considered not going but I knew she had wanted me to go – I am very glad I did. This disease can render you hopeless but taking a unified message to Capitol Hill with hundreds of others was inspiring – we all had a shared bond.

My story is unfortunately far too common – 65% of patients die in their first year of diagnosis. This year alone nearly 57,000 Americans will be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, including an estimated 910 from Alabama. Pancreatic cancer is currently the third leading cause of cancer-related death in the United States and expected to become the second leading cause of cancer death by 2030. While survival rates for many other cancers have improved, the five-year survival rate for pancreatic cancer is only nine percent. That means that of 100 people that are diagnosed today, only 9 will

still be alive in 5 years. These statistics are unacceptable. There is no early detection strategy for pancreatic cancer and few effective treatment options. We must demand better and research funding is the key to solving this challenging disease and changing these devastating statistics.

Thanks in large part to the step Congress took in addressing pancreatic cancer through the Recalcitrant Cancer Research Act of 2012, the National Cancer Institute is making progress implementing the bill and providing new research opportunities for pancreatic cancer. And while there has been a slow increase in the federal investment in pancreatic cancer, research funding remains disproportionate to the severity of the disease.

Along with the NCI, the Department of Defense (DoD) is an important source of funding for cancer research. The DoD focuses on high risk, high reward research, an important compliment to NCI research funding and critically important for a disease like pancreatic cancer. Research shows that within a cohort of U.S. veterans, there is a direct evidence for increased risk of death from pancreatic cancer. Veterans often have known risk factors for pancreatic cancer, including environmental exposure, other medical conditions such as diabetes, and lifestyle factors such as smoking and obesity.

Thanks to you and your colleagues, since 2011 Congress has provided funding annually for pancreatic cancer research through the Peer Reviewed Cancer Research Program (PRCRP) at the DoD. This funding has provided a small but important amount of support for innovative and competitive pancreatic cancer research. However, through the highly-competitive PRCRP mechanism, each year there are upwards of a dozen other cancers that are eligible for funding. Only a few pancreatic grants are awarded each year. In fact, in fiscal year 2018, 80 pancreatic cancer grant applications were submitted to the PRCRP, but only 5 were recommended for funding.

A more focused pancreatic cancer research effort at the DoD is desperately needed. We believe a positive step forward is the creation of a new, dedicated DoD research program for pancreatic cancer. Earlier this year, 102 Representatives sent a bipartisan letter to the House Appropriations Committee requesting a \$10 million pancreatic cancer research program in the fiscal year 2020 Defense Appropriations Act. Senator Jones, you joined 24 of your Senate colleagues in signing a similar letter to the Senate Appropriations Committee urging the committee to create a new Pancreatic Cancer Research Program. I am extremely appreciative of your support and leadership on behalf of this request.

In June, the House took an important step when it approved its version of the fiscal year 2020 Defense Appropriations Act. Thanks to the bipartisan leadership of Representatives Anna Eshoo and David McKinley, the House bill includes \$6 million for a new dedicated Pancreatic Cancer Research Program. Unfortunately, the Senate version of the bill marked up by the Senate Appropriations Committee in September does not include any funding for a new pancreatic cancer program. In the Senate bill, the disease remains in the PRCRP – competing with other diseases for research

dollars. As a result, due to the complicated budget situation, it appears that our best approach moving forward is to increase the House-approved amount to \$10 million in the final conferenced version of the Defense Appropriations Act. PanCAN hopes that you will continue to champion this request and work with your colleagues on the House and Senate Appropriations Committees to make sure the new Pancreatic Cancer Research Program is funded at \$10 million.

Pancreatic Cancer does not discriminate. Notable figures have recently been in the news like Alex Trebek, the host of JEOPARDY and Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg. This also isn't a blue or a red issue, it's literally a purple issue. I found myself praying in the office of a senator with differing political views than me. Because as I noted earlier, going through this disease bonds you with others – you become a part of a community, a community that's committed to saving lives. And that's why I am here today. The time is now.

Senator Jones, on behalf of PanCAN and the thousands of American families who, like me, have lost a loved one to pancreatic cancer, I want to thank you again for holding this hearing today. We look forward to continuing to work with you to change the lives of those in Alabama, across our country, and around the world who have been diagnosed with this deadly cancer.