

Vice President Joe Biden Threatens the Scientific Community



By Alex Berezow, PhD — June 30, 2016



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Vice President Joe Biden's son, Beau, died an untimely death due to brain cancer. My heart goes out to the Vice President, who has suffered far more personal tragedies than any human being deserves to in this short life on Earth.

Because of his family's experience with cancer, Mr. Biden has become the face of the Obama Administration's "[Cancer Moonshot](#) [2]," a \$1 billion initiative whose mission is to "bring about a decade's worth of advances in five years." It's an admirable goal, and the Obama Administration ought to be applauded for pushing it.

However, Mr. Biden's recent remarks at the Cancer Moonshot Summit took a very different -- and accusatory -- tone. The Associated Press [reports](#) [3] that the Vice President "threatened Wednesday to pull federal funding for cancer studies that fail to publicly disclose their results."

The article goes on:

"He cited concerns that prominent medical institutions that receive millions in taxpayer dollars are flouting a federal rule that says they must submit their results to a publicly accessible database within a year. 'Doc, I'm going to find out if it's true, and if it's true, I'm going to cut funding,' Biden said. 'That's a promise.'"

Let's set aside the fact that the Vice President has no authority to do this. He has certainly put his finger on a widespread problem in the scientific community, namely the tortoise-like pace of scientific publishing. Even worse, scientists usually do not publish negative results, which holds back progress. These are well known and widely discussed problems. So, it is difficult to see how threatening to pull funding from researchers who fail to comply with federal grant requirements

advances the discussion in a productive way. If it has any effect, it will be simply to aggravate biomedical researchers.

Mr. Biden then went on to say some other rather dubious things. For example, according to AP, he noted that cancer research was "on the cusp of breakthroughs" but that cancer researchers were getting in their own way.

It is frustrating when politicians give terminally ill patients false hope. Yes, cancer research is making progress ([mortality rates are down](#) [4]), and yes, there may even be breakthroughs in the near future. But nobody knows for sure. Given the fact that many Americans believe that medical researchers are [purposefully withholding a cure for cancer](#) [5], Mr. Biden's comment was rather ill-advised.

Mr. Biden went on to criticize drug companies for what he believes are unnecessary price increases.

This, of course, has absolutely nothing to do with the Cancer Moonshot initiative, which is supposed to focus on research, and instead appears to be little more than a cheap shot at the pharmaceutical industry. To be sure, Big Pharma inspires neither compassion nor pity. The industry [averages 19 percent profit margins](#) [6], which is excellent. By comparison, however, [Apple's net profit margin](#) [7] is nearly 21 percent, while that of [Wells Fargo, a bank, is 25 percent](#) [8]. Thus, the outrage directed at pharmaceutical companies appears to be selective and politically motivated.

I believe Mr. Biden has good intentions. I fully understand and even sympathize with the Vice President's personal pain and frustration. However, threatening and pointing fingers at the scientific community is often counterproductive.

Finally, consider this: If Dick Cheney had similarly threatened to pull funding from scientists, how would the public and media have reacted?

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[2] <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/01/fact-sheet-investing-national-cancer-moonshot>

[3] http://hosted2.ap.org/APDEFAULT/b2f0ca3a594644ee9e50a8ec4ce2d6de/Article_2016-06-29-US--Biden-Cancer/id-be60e1a311b44053b97249d1a881b931

[4] http://www.realclearscience.com/journal_club/2014/09/29/we_are_slowly_winning_the_war_on_cancer_108868.html

[5] <http://acsh.org/news/2016/06/11/proof-that-there-is-no-fda-big-pharma-conspiracy-to-suppress-cancer-cures/>

[6] <http://www.fool.com/investing/value/2015/07/19/7-facts-you-probably-dont-know-about-big-pharma.aspx>

[7] https://ycharts.com/companies/AAPL/profit_margin

[8] <http://www.forbes.com/sites/liyanchen/2014/05/13/best-of-the-biggest-how-profitable-are-the-worlds-largest-companies/#2b4a4ba64c33>