

VIEWPOINTS | PAID CONTENT

The Promise of Health Solutions Science

Christina M. Annunziata, MD, PhD, Tammy R. L. Collins, PhD, Cristianne Frazier, PhD, Bethany A. Kerr, PhD, LeighAnne M. Olsen, PhD, Khara M. Ramos, PhD, Eduardo Sanchez, MD, MPH, FAHA, Kevin Sia, PhD, Asta V. Sorensen, MA, Danielle Whicher, MHS, PhD, Emily Young, PhD, Sindy Escobar Alvarez, PhD

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From a funder's perspective, a nationwide conversation among research, medicine, health systems, local government and community leaders, supported by the Collective to Strengthen Pathways for Health Research, showed that reliance on cures is insufficient to improve the health of Americans. However, science to inform policies and practices that could prevent disease or strengthen delivery of care is supported inadequately, often underinformed by or misaligned with needs of potential knowledge users. These limitations, and the dearth of much needed systemic incentives to facilitate application of this knowledge, challenge those making a case for systematic and robust investments. We call on sectors involved to join us in elevating and building pathways for thriving science that delivers better health outcomes by informing ways to address clinical, behavioral, environmental, social and economic drivers of health: a health solutions science.

“Toward a Healthier Future: Building a Science of Health Beyond Biomedical Discovery” showcases examples of health services research in action as a form of **health solutions science** — an umbrella term we use to describe a broad, interdisciplinary field that addresses behavioral, clinical, environmental, and socioeconomic drivers of health and develops practical solutions to improve health outcomes. This vital but under-recognized piece of the U.S. research enterprise complements the nation's robust biomedical research ecosystem, which is primarily concerned with understanding disease biology and developing ways to treat patients once they show up sick at the doctor.

As we learned through 18 national symposia that informed the work in this issue, we cannot reap the full societal return of the impressive gains made in biomedical research without deeper and more strategic and systematic investment in health solutions science. The symposia, held in

2025 across 14 cities where leaders representing academic medicine, public health, community-based social services, government, philanthropy, and industry, identified actionable examples and potential benefits of health solutions science. They also demonstrated that outputs from this science remain fragmented and limited to small pilots, inhibiting their ability to achieve the scale and spread needed to transform outcomes nationwide.

Through this special issue, we aim to catalyze greater recognition and support for the important work of researchers and practitioners across the country who bring care closer to where people live, build reliable health services, and develop policies that improve health outcomes for all.

Why We Started Asking Different Questions

The U.S. is one of the unhealthiest advanced-income nations by most measures, despite spending more on health care than peer nations.¹ Even the most privileged residents fare worse than their counterparts in similar countries.² As philanthropic funders and supporters of impact-driven science in the world's powerhouse for biomedical innovation and research, we questioned why investments in biomedical research — and its many insights and medical innovations — have not resulted in better health outcomes for all who live in this country.

While we are not the first to ask this question,³ and recognizing that science investments are only part of the health equation, we asked whether we are funding all the research approaches needed to deliver better health outcomes, and if so, are we funding them in the right measure? These questions feel especially salient now, when the scientific ecosystem is being fundamentally reshaped. This upheaval reinforced our desire to rethink how to align funding strategies to maximize societal benefits.

What We Set Out to Explore

To begin answering these questions, we endeavored to learn more about nonbiomedical domains of health research focused on behaviors, environments, and systems, rather than on biology. We recognize that drivers of health under this umbrella have been supported as individual fields in fragmented or precarious ways. What unites them is a shared intent and potential for positive impact: preventing disease, improving quality of care, promoting physical, mental, and social well-being, and increasing the chances of positive health outcomes at every step in a person's life course.

To learn more about health solutions science, we posed a series of questions for the symposia to address (see Appendix), aimed at clarifying the value proposition for this area of research and innovation, identifying structural barriers and enablers, and surfacing near-term opportunities to improve health outcomes. A full account of our learnings are shared elsewhere.⁴

What follows here reflects the promise we saw, and we share these insights not as a conclusion, but as an invitation — to clinicians, researchers, patients, policymakers, funders, governmental and non-governmental organizations, community members and advocates — to help shape what comes next and strengthen the pathways from investments in science to better health for all.

What We Heard Across the Country

“And despite all of the best evidence and preventative approaches and all the things that I was trained in, like 38 years ago, we continue to favor treatment over prevention.” — *a nurse at the University of Alabama, Birmingham symposium*

The Opportunity Cost of Underinvestment in Innovation to Prevent Disease and Improve Clinical Care Is Astounding

Many symposia emphasized that underinvestment in prevention research is a glaring missed opportunity. Expanding research on how to implement and scale proven prevention and disease screening and management strategies, as well as developing, testing, and using interventions to address geographical, social, and economic drivers of health, for example, could avert substantial avoidable morbidity, mortality, and costs. The opportunity cost of underinvestment in health solutions science is measured in preventable deaths, high morbidity, persistent health inequities, and lost productivity.

The 18 symposia showed that health solutions science needs to think differently about not only health care delivery systems, but also the funding models to support research toward proposed solutions, and the means for sustaining new solutions once they are established.

“The other thing we need is to front load this concept of translation. It has to be at the beginning of the research cycle, not at the end.” — *panelist on how to redesign and operationalize research structures and funding priorities, University of Alabama, Birmingham symposium*

What Is Prioritized and How It Is Funded Facilitates or Limits Potential for Impact

Prioritization of evidence-based solutions rooted in prevention, community health, and translation of existing knowledge would complement ongoing biomedical innovation to help make strides in addressing common conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and birth-related complications. Funding models can maximize the potential for impact by:

- Creating paths for promising ideas to go beyond short-term pilots and to account for the costs to preserve relationships between researchers and community-based organizations that are critical to maintain trust, relevance, and application.
- Incentivizing research that has the potential to result in policy, process, or practice innovation. Funding streams frequently incentivize patentable novelty and academic outputs, making it difficult to develop and sustain solutions with innovative potential.
- Offering funding terms and review cycles responsive to different research cycles. For example, prevention research may require longer funding over longer timeframes, while the hypothesis testing of discrete improvements in health systems may be shorter.
- Using diverse forms of capital, such as venture philanthropy, blended funds, and mission-related investments to fuel discovery, adoption, sustainability, and commercialization. The text box [\(Box 1\)](#) illustrates progress and promise in applying diversified funding to health solutions

Box 1.

Market-rate impact investing is one creative funding example. The American Cancer Society's BrightEdge identified affordability as a critical barrier in cancer care: many patients abandon treatment because the cost of care generates overwhelming financial burden. To address this, BrightEdge invested in TaylorMed, a software company helping patients find and enroll in financial assistance programs. Using market-rate venture capital, BrightEdge backed a scalable platform that now connects patients to over 7000 support programs, enabling hospitals to reduce financial costs and improve treatment adherence. The investment generated financial returns for the American Cancer Society while touching millions of patients' lives.

science. Adapting investment models that accelerate biomedical progress can open new pathways to translate evidence from health solutions science into enduring health improvements.

“Our work primarily emerges in alignment with our health system priorities and the things that are most important for our operational partners.” — *panelist on health system innovation at the New York University symposium*

The Impact of Health Solutions Science Is Limited by a Gap in Translation, and Cross-Sector Coordination Is an Essential, but Uncommon, Step to Generate Knowledge Relevant to Application

Cross-sector partnerships are essential for effective and impactful health solutions science. Partnerships add relevance by allowing research agendas to reflect lived experience and local context, and to be responsive to the needs of those who would use the knowledge generated to change policies, processes, and practices such as community members or patients. Cross-sector coalitions also provide the networks and can reveal governance approaches to scale successful interventions regionally or nationally, rather than leaving them as isolated pilots. While change may be underway, institutional support for cross-sector engagement in academic settings is not widespread.

Funders can maximize health solutions science impact by prioritizing cross-disciplinary work with defined health output and outcome metrics.⁵ These may be framed as equity indicators, cost savings, or social return on investment, aligning incentives and enabling diverse sector involvement, including healthcare, social services, housing, education, occupational, and technology.⁶

“We need to solve real-world problems. If it's not a problem in the community...then it's not a problem that we need to be focusing on right now. We have to be context aware.” — *Presenter from the University of Alabama, Birmingham symposium*

The Full Potential of Sites or Sectors Where Impactful Research Could Be Done Is Not Harnessed

Nearly all symposia explored diverse sites and sectors where research could be done. The cross-cutting finding is that while research in the U.S. has begun moving beyond academia and hospitals, it has not yet fully tapped the potential of health systems, community practices, community-based organizations, public health departments, nonmedical sectors, and technology partners as sites for impactful research. The missed opportunity, as highlighted by others,⁷ is that these underrecognized contributors are where many disease drivers and preventable outcomes play out.

Where to Work Together

Limited time and the relentless pressure to secure funding against the backdrop of changing federal funding priorities may have limited engagement in field-building conversations among symposia participants. However, the nation's current health challenges are a call for a fresh approach that recognizes the power of a more comprehensive and inclusive health research spectrum.

The wisdom of the symposia participants left us hearing calls for (1) outcomes-based alignment across policy makers, communities (including patients), health system leaders, scientists, and clinicians to produce relevant health solutions science with high potential for application, and (2) policies facilitating alignment, adequate funding, and partnership infrastructure. This is an all-hands approach where no single sector can make progress alone. We intend to use our learnings towards achieving the medium-term goals of:

- Identifying and advancing actionable models for funding, policy reforms, and industry investments driving transformative, equitable population health gains built on aligned societal health priorities, research agendas, and financial incentives.
- Initiating a cross-sector coalition to champion strengthened national health solutions science and equitable gains in health.
- Increasing understanding, engagement, and support for prevention-focused innovation and the health research workforce that drives improved clinical care.

Will You Join Us?

If the U.S. hopes to translate scientific leadership into healthier lives, strengthening this part of the research enterprise is no longer optional — it is essential.

We invite funders and partners to join us to elevate visibility, drive innovation, and bridge health solutions science discoveries to policies, processes, and practices to improve health. Now is the time for the science community to expand efforts and maximize knowledge conversion into measurable gains in health and well-being across the nation.

Christina M. Annunziata, MD, PhD

Senior Vice President, Extramural Discovery Science, American Cancer Society, Atlanta, GA, USA

Tammy R. L. Collins, PhD

Program Officer, Burroughs Wellcome Fund, Durham, NC, USA

Cristianne Frazier, PhD

Program Director, Medical Research, Circle of Service Foundation, Chicago, IL, USA

Bethany A. Kerr, PhD

Scientific Program Manager, Susan G. Komen, Dallas, TX, USA

LeighAnne M. Olsen, PhD

Director, Medical Research Portfolio Robertson Foundation, New York, NY, USA

Khara M. Ramos, PhD

Vice President, Neuroscience & Society, Dana Foundation, New York, NY, USA

Eduardo Sanchez, MD, MPH, FAHA

Chief Medical Officer for Prevention, American Heart Association, Dallas, TX, USA

Kevin Sia, PhD

Senior Program Officer for Medical Research, Doris Duke Foundation, New York, NY, USA

Asta V. Sorensen, MA

Senior Consultant, Raleigh-Durham, NC, USA

Danielle Whicher, MHS, PhD

Senior Researcher, Mathematica, Washington, DC, USA

Emily Young, PhD

Vice President of Programs, Prebys Foundation, San Diego, CA

Sindy Escobar Alvarez, PhD

Program Director for Medical Research, Doris Duke Foundation, New York, NY, USA

Sindy Escobar Alvarez can be contacted at mrp@dorisduke.org.

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