Jill Biden Discusses Breast Cancer Research at UCSF

University of California San Francisco hosted First Lady Jill Biden to speak about the Cancer Moonshot and breast cancer research.

October 24, 2022 By University of California San Francisco and Elizabeth Fernandez

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First Lady Jill Biden, Ed.D, met with top University of California, San Francisco cancer leaders during a visit Friday, October 7, to hear about UCSF's breast cancer research and progress on the National Cancer Moonshot. The visit was timed to mark Breast Cancer Awareness Month in October.

Hosted by Alan Ashworth, PhD, FRS, president of the UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center (HDFCCC), the visit highlighted the complexities of cancer, as well as UCSF advances in breast cancer research and programs that support breast cancer patients, survivors and caregivers.

Dr. Biden first visited UCSF with then-Vice President Joe Biden in 2016 as part of the launch of the Cancer Moonshot, which aimed to accelerate progress against cancer and develop new and swifter cancer therapies. In early 2022, President Biden reignited the Cancer Moonshot with an audacious goal of cutting the cancer death rate in half over the next quarter century.

I am filled with such hope after meeting with @UCSFCancer breast cancer researchers, and hearing about the progress they've made since Joe and I visited in 2016.

This is how we make strides to end cancer as we know

it. #CancerMoonshot pic.twitter.com/WvZ16XlEc5

— Jill Biden (@FLOTUS) October 7, 2022

During the First Lady's followup visit, Ashworth gave an overview of "tremendous" progress that has occurred in the last six years, including numerous advances that enable scientists and physicians to home in on an individual's specific cancer. He stressed the importance of genetic testing for breast cancer patients — and doing so equitably — as well as progress in understanding the complexity of cancer.

"Victories are hard work," said Ashworth, a renowned breast cancer researcher who helped discover the BRCA2 genetic mutation, as well as PARP inhibitors to treat BRCA1 and BRCA2, and who also serves as senior vice president of cancer services for UCSF Health. "That is why we have to be passionate."

Expanding Care and Research to Every Community

Accompanying Biden on her visit to the UCSF Bakar Precision Cancer Medicine Building was the new director of the National Cancer Institute, Monica Bertagnolli, MD, on her first public event during the Biden Administration, as well as Congresswoman Jackie Speier (D, CA). Joining them on UCSF's Mission Bay campus were UCSF Chancellor Sam Hawgood, MBBS, and Suresh Gunasekaran, MBA, president and chief executive of UCSF Health.

During the visit, UCSF Breast Care Center Director Laura Esserman, MD, MBA, director of the UCSF Breast Care Center, discussed two landmark national clinical studies that she is leading — the I-SPY2 Trial and the WISDOM study — which aim to better understand breast cancer and to reduce the toll of the disease.

"We want care tomorrow to be better than what it is today,'' said Esserman, who co-leads the UCSF Breast Oncology Program. "We don't think it is one size fits all. We want to screen smarter: less for those who don't need it and more for those who do. Every woman from every community deserves a chance to participate."

A key theme throughout her visit was the importance of UCSF's community outreach and various initiatives to engage diverse populations in clinical trials.

Biden noted the challenges that can accompany joining a clinical trial while in the midst of cancer treatment. "It takes a lot of courage," she said. "It is so stressful."

Esserman said investigators should design better clinical trials to make them more appealing to participants. "Trials are opportunities for women," she said. "They shouldn't be thought of as a daunting experience. We have to be smarter and better."

A Personal Journey

Biden recounted the cancer journey she personally embarked on in 1993, after four of her friends were diagnosed with breast cancer.

“That was my beginning,” she said. “It is personal.”

Biden started the Biden Breast Health Initiative in Delaware, educating thousands of high school girls about the importance of early breast cancer detection. She has continued her breast cancer work through the decades, emphasizing the importance of both early detection and cancer screening in general. Toward that end, she has encouraged government partners, the business community, and others to make screenings more accessible and available.

Joining the visit were Hope S. Rugo, MD, director of Breast Oncology and Clinical Trials Education at the HDFCCC; Kim Rhoads, MD, associate director of Community Engagement at the HDFCCC; and Amy Alanes, executive director of the Women’s Cancer Resource Center.

Biden also met with breast cancer researchers and students to learn about their career paths and their research. They included Laura Huppert, MD; Rita Mukhtar, MD; Paola Betancur, MD; and Kami Pullakhandam, a clinical trials navigator.

We want care tomorrow to be better than what it is today.

“I love what you are doing here,” said Biden, as the visit concluded. “You have great hearts.”

> We were pleased to host First Lady Dr. Jill Biden @FLOTUS during her visit to @UCSFCancer for an update on the National Cancer Moonshot initiative. The visit, marking Breast Cancer Awareness Month, highlighted progress in breast cancer research at UCSF since Biden’s 2016 visit. pic.twitter.com/cnNJWowDSf
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> — UC San Francisco (@UCSF) October 7, 2022

The UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center is a National Cancer Institute-designated cancer center. The centers are recognized for their scientific leadership in laboratory

and clinical research, as well as for providing communities services tailored to their unique needs and populations.

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