Turning to Twitter, MD Anderson doc launches campaign against cancer drug prices

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Amid growing debate over skyrocketing drug prices, a group is launching a social media campaign to bring down the price of cancer meds, saying companies are profiteering on patients' lives.

Dr. Hagop Kantarjian from Houston, TX-based MD Anderson Cancer Center is starting an online petition with patients and physicians, hoping to gather 1 million signatures to push Congress and the White House to reduce the price of cancer meds, The Wall Street Journal's Pharmalot blog reports. Kantarjian, an outspoken critic of rising drug costs, said he will work with a core group of about 10 to 20 people to collect signatures to "put some pressure on our representatives to represent patients and stop representing pharmaceutical interest groups."

"At some point, somebody has to be ashamed if American lives are being taken away for profits," Kantarjian told the WSJ. "If 1 million don't make a difference, maybe we're not in a democratic system. Maybe we're in a plutocratic system. But I think 1 million signatures will matter."

Kantarjian has some suggestions on how to cut the prices. He also laid out a 5-point plan to combat high cancer med pricing. Part of the solution involves allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices, Kantarjian said, and importing drugs from Canada could also reduce costs for insurance companies and patients who are dealing with high copays. He suggests shipping in meds from the country could also deliver a win to drug companies, as patients who can't afford the drug in the U.S. might decide to purchase it in Canada at a lower price.

"If we put these in place, it will allow market forces to work in a more favorable way," Kantarjian said (as quoted by the WSJ).

This is not the first time cancer docs have weighed in on the rising price of cancer meds. A few years ago, Peter Bach and colleagues at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center turned away Sanofi's (SNY) new colon cancer drug Zaltrap, saying its 6-figure price outweighed any potential benefits. Sanofi responded with a 50% price reduction. In 2013, more than 100 top docs from around the world--including Kantarjian--banded together to protest the astronomical costs of cancer drugs, calling the prices immoral and labeling drugmakers as profiteers.

Kantarjian's petition also comes on the heels of government action on drug pricing. Earlier this month, President Obama said in his proposed budget that Medicare Part D should be able to
negotiate prices "to ensure access to and affordability of" treatments for chronic or lethal diseases. The chance of the measure being approved by a Republican-controlled Congress is slim to none, but the proposal puts more pressure on the industry to control prices on new treatments.

Meanwhile, payers are critiquing sky-high drug prices and calling for changes in the industry--especially in light of recent approvals for Gilead's (GILD) $84,000-per-treatment-course hep C med Sovaldi and AbbVie's (ABBV) $94,500 hep C combo Viekira Pak. Earlier this year, Express Scripts (ESRX) Chief Medical Officer Steve Miller laid out a four-point solution to fix the drug pricing problem, suggesting that companies set up contracts with all stakeholders before a product is approved and help secure a final U.S. biosimilars pathway to fund next-generation therapies.

- read the WSJ article (sub. req.)

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