Appropriations Committee
February 10, 2016

Testimony of Dr. Annabelle Rodriquez-Oquendo

Re: UConn Health Budget Cuts

Thank you for allowing me precious time to convey my commitment to UConn Health and the Bioscience CT Initiative.

I'm an endocrinologist and my entire medical career has been devoted to the academic mission: patient care, teaching, and research. Specifically, I have devoted my career to studying how cholesterol impacts health.

My translational research work stems from seeing a patient with high HDL cholesterol (the healthy fraction) but, paradoxically, atherosclerotic disease or hardening of arteries due to cholesterol accumulation.

We studied the HDL cholesterol gene and my research team identified mutations in the gene that significantly increased risk for heart disease in men and women, and for infertility in women. We developed a patent for a blood test so that other health care providers could easily identify these patients. These patents were licensed to a commercial entity and they are now available for clinicians to use throughout the US.

This is an example of how publically funded research dollars from the NIH translate into commercial products that use a personalized medicine approach to solve clinical problems. To me this totally fits the mission of Bioscience CT.

I was recruited to UConn Health in Sept 2012 from Johns Hopkins for the expressed purpose of advancing personalized medicine and translating discovery research for the greater good.

Since becoming a faculty member at UConn Health, I have developed another patent and it has been licensed to Lipid Genomics, a start-up company I founded and is now physically based within the Technology Incubator Program at the UConn Health campus. This new patent was also funded by federal NIH research dollars and provided the means to create jobs at UConn Health. This is another example of how discovery research not only helps improve people's lives, but creates jobs.

Lipid Genomics is currently in high level discussions with commercial entities based here in CT and abroad to advance the technology developed at UConn Health. The immediate goal is to hire between 6-10 employees and advance development of drugs and diagnostics for patients with genetic cholesterol disorders.

Let me be clear that I'm not doing this all by myself. Cutting edge discovery research that translates into commercial products that benefit society is done through a team effort, and in an environment that deliberately fosters creativity, innovation and team science.

My research team mentors Connecticut high school, college, graduate and medical students, all of whom are excited about what the future holds for them personally and their role in solving big medical problems. I've established new collaborative efforts with scientists at UConn Storrs, such that we have formed a new group called the ImmunoCardiovascular Group, whose purpose is to integrate science from nutrition, immunology, endocrinology, cardiovascular diseases, and statistics to solve problems related to heart disease, still the number one killer for Americans.

Thank you for making the commitment to Bioscience CT and putting forward the financial resources to recruit physician-scientists like me, for the new infrastructure on campus, and for recruiting The Jackson Laboratory. The buildings are indeed beautiful but those buildings by themselves are not training the next generation of scientists in Connecticut and retaining them to stop the brain drain from the State. The buildings are not creative and innovative. People do these important things, and they do it in a creative, collaborative, and innovative environment. UConn Health needs operating dollars to continue hiring people like me.

From my perspective, we are seeing the payoff for this investment from Bioscience CT and it needs to be maintained, not cut.

I firmly believe that Connecticut fosters a scientific environment that produces solutions to big problems, all for the greater good. It would be a lost opportunity to reverse this commitment now.

Thank you for supporting UConn Health and for allowing me the opportunity to share my experiences and views with you today.