Dear Mr. Simon:

The American Society for Radiation Oncology (ASTRO) applauds the efforts of the NCI Blue Ribbon Panel in developing its draft recommendations on how to significantly move the cancer research field forward. Accelerating the pace of cancer research will improve patient outcomes and the quality of life for cancer survivors. Since the inception of Vice President Biden’s Cancer Moonshot Initiative (CMI), ASTRO has been an early and eager supporter of its ambitious goals. Unfortunately, we are concerned that neither the panel composition nor the recommendations published from these panels are truly inclusive.

The CMI is poised to be revolutionary and a game changer for cancer research. The focus on new breakthrough treatments such as immunotherapy clearly aligns with the goals of this program. However, lack of inclusion of more traditional therapies in conjunction with novel approaches like immunotherapy does an injustice for patients hoping to receive the best care. CMI leadership must ensure representation of those with expertise in all effective treatment modalities during discussions and in the final recommendations in order to produce the best science and develop the best treatments. ASTRO believes it is a regrettable oversight that radiation oncologists were absent from the Blue Ribbon Panel as there was only a single radiation oncologist included in any of the working groups.

Immunotherapy treatment alone is effective in only 10 – 20% of patients treated. Combination of immunotherapy with traditional treatment such as radiation dramatically increases efficacy and improves outcomes for patients. Lack of inclusion of those with varied expertise limits the completeness of the Panel’s recommendations, and hinders development of the best treatments for cancer patients. We believe the intent of the CMI and the Blue Ribbon Panel’s recommendations emphasize combination therapy; however, by not discussing the role of radiation therapy and other treatment modalities with immunotherapy, the language fails to match this intent and could confuse patients. We recommend that the final recommendations more fully discuss the role of radiation therapy in combination therapy.

ASTRO strongly encourages the Task Force to ensure its recommendations achieve its goal of eliminating silos – and not creating them – and work toward an integrated approach to advancing cancer research. We continue to stand ready to do our part to further research into many of these areas.

Sincerely,

Laura Thevenot
Chief Executive Officer