Head of National Cancer Institute Resigns
Nobel laureate Harold Varmus led the National Cancer Institute since 2010, after heading up NIH from 1993 to 1999

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Credit: NCI

Call it the end of an era. Harold Varmus, director of the US National Cancer Institute (NCI) and former director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), announced on March 4 that he will be stepping down from his post at the end of the month.

Varmus is leaving the institute with few regrets. “I got the big things I wanted to start in motion,” he says. This includes expanding research on cancer genomics and changing how investigators are funded in an environment in which grant money has been tight.

Varmus' research has focused on the genetics of cancer, and he won the 1989 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for his work on the role of retroviruses in cancer. In 1993, US President Bill Clinton appointed Varmus to lead the NIH, a post he held for six years. Varmus left the agency in 1999, and in 2000 he became president of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. He returned to the NIH in 2010 to direct the NCI, the agency's largest institute.
Under Varmus’ tenure, the NCI has increasingly moved toward funding research on targeted therapies for cancers. Varmus presided over the recent completion of The Cancer Genome Atlas, a database of genomes sequenced from 10,000 tumours.

In recent years, Varmus has campaigned to increase NIH funding, and co-authored a controversial editorial in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in which he and colleagues expressed concerns for the future, including that the NIH was training more young biomedical scientists than could be employed.

What he still worries about is the perception that biomedical research must have a clinical or translational aspect to be worth funding. The NIH is seeing fewer applications for basic research, he says, despite the agency’s insistence that it is a priority. “I think all of us would like to ensure there's a world for someone who simply wants to understand biology,” he says.

In his March 4 letter to NCI staff, Varmus wrote that he plans to start a “modestly sized” research lab at the Weill Cornell Medical College in New York City. He will also be working with the New York Genome Center, a non-profit consortium of universities that was established in 2012 to offer genome sequencing and bioinformatics services. Douglas Lowy, an oncologist at the NCI who studies human papillomavirus, will serve as the institute's interim director after Varmus departs.

Varmus says that he had only planned to lead the NCI for about five years, and is looking forward to spending more time with his wife as well as returning to the lab. He is particularly excited about US President Barack Obama's recently announced Precision Medicine Initiative, which will initially focus on targeting treatments to cancers on the basis of individual differences.

With its multiple cancer hospitals and varied ethnic groups, New York City will be an exciting place to be as the programme unfolds, Varmus adds. “Precision medicine is already becoming a reality now. Those wheels are already turning,” he says.