

National Foundation for Cancer Research

Leading Game-changing Discoveries



“NFCR and AIM-HI are about impact investing, and our greatest success will be when breakthroughs being made in the lab are commercialized and made readily available to patients.”

Sujuan Ba, Ph.D.
President & CEO, NFCR;
Co-Founder & CEO,
AIM-HI Accelerator Fund

The National Foundation for Cancer Research is a cancer-related charity co-founded by Albert Szent-Györgyi, who won the 1937 Nobel Prize in Medicine for his discovery of Vitamin C.

With the grassroots support of millions of Americans, NFCR has distinguished itself by funding “high-risk” basic-science cancer research often overlooked by other major funding sources, and since 1973 NFCR has funded over \$390 million, making possible many scientific breakthroughs in new cancer treatments today—breakthroughs that are giving cancer patients hope and promise for a cure.

Dr. Sujuan Ba joined NFCR in 1999 as Chief Science Officer, then Chief Operating Officer, and in 2019 was named President and CEO. Trained as a scientist with a background in the biotech sector, Sujuan expanded NFCR’s research programs significantly and created an influential international research collaborative platform to support the joint efforts of scientists who work together with one common mission: defeat cancer.

An example of how, under her leadership, NFCR now works with many universities, research hospitals, and cancer-related charities is the design and launch of GBM AGILE. They have provided over \$3 Million in funding since 2014 to support the program, a patient-centered revolutionary global adaptive platform trial system. It can test multiple therapies for patients with newly-diagnosed and recurrent glioblastoma (GBM), the deadliest form of brain cancer, to develop better new therapies much faster. “The conventional clinical trial systems take 5-7 years, or longer, to get one new therapy through the human trials. Brain cancer patients don’t have 5-7 years to wait. We must double down our efforts to speed up the development of the new therapies to save brain cancer patients,” says Dr. Ba.

Sujuan takes an “outside the box” approach to building programs at NFCR and has gained recognition for being a dynamic and visionary leader, continuing to push the kind of high risk/high impact programs that are future engines for “disruptive and innovative technologies” that bring hope and promise to cancer patients.

Inspiring & Mentoring Women

More and more ambitious young women enter the field of life sciences intending to start their own companies, only to find themselves with a much more challenging path than their male colleagues in the same positions would.

In 2020 only 2.2% of total venture capital dollars and less than 15% of angel funds went to companies started or led by women in the life sciences industry, according to the Association for Women in Science (AWIS) research.

To address this underserved group of entrepreneurs and leaders, Dr. Ba led the launch of the AIM-HI Women’s Venture Competition in 2020, a first-of-its-kind initiative to provide early-stage funding, coaching, and networking opportunities to oncology startups led by women. This program is now in its third year. In addition to the funding, participants can also benefit from:

- Extraordinary networking opportunities with key opinion leaders, business executives, investors, and fellow women entrepreneurs;
- Recognition and visibility for the women leaders and their companies;
- Insightful feedback from the world-class Selection and Judging Committees.

In 2022, Dr. Ba led the launch of AIM-HI’s “Charting the Course” Interview Series, highlighting stories of outstanding women leaders as role models for young women. Dr. Ba’s vision is to build a collaborative and supportive platform that will fund, nurture, accelerate, and elevate the world’s most promising oncology

entrepreneurs and startups.

Sujuan is all about teamwork, collaboration, and innovation. She allows her team to take the initiative and is always open to suggestions. She encourages her staff members to learn new skills, discover their strengths, determine where their passions lie and then develop what they are good at. Under her mentorship, many young and new team members have grown and progressed into team leaders with brand new kills developed after joining NFCR. One particular recent innovative initiative is the development of the NFCR Oncology Metaverse. Several young staff have become the instrumental leaders for this project, with the encouragement and mentoring from Sujuan. The team’s joint goal is to build an ecosystem where scientists, oncologists, entrepreneurs, investors, business leaders, and patient advocates can come together, find insightful information, connect with thought leaders. We envision our “Oncology Metaverse” to become an online platform for the cancer research community to communicate and collaborate.

In addition, Dr. Ba has also led the establishment of the Young Ambassadors Program since 2010. This program provides high school and college students an opportunity to serve as young leaders, combine their passion for science, sports, and/or the arts with community service, and support cancer research. NFCR Youth Ambassadors learn critical leadership skills, such as recruiting, raising awareness, and fundraising.

Leading the Foundation to Great Heights

One of the first high-profile and significant research programs in Dr. Ba’s tenure as NFCR Chief Science Officer was the creation of the ScreenSaver-LifeSaver Project. It’s a partnership between NFCR, United Devices, Inc., Intel Corporation, and the University of Oxford in the UK that launched a distributed computing technolo-

gy-based application to accelerate pharmaceutical drug screening by linking more than three million PC users around the world to create the world’s largest supercomputer.

The ScreenSaver-LifeSaver program enabled scientists to perform virtual screenings of 3.5 billion small molecules against some twelve target proteins to identify new anti-cancer drug candidates, cutting the lengthy drug discovery process for many potential cancer therapies. This program was written up as one of the innovations by Shira P. White in her book, *New Ideas about New Ideas, Insights on Creativity from the World’s Leading Innovations* in 2002; it was also featured in the book, *Entrepreneurship: a case study from two viewpoints*, by Graham Richards and Tony Marchington.

In 2019 Dr. Ba co-founded the AIM-HI Accelerator Fund, a non-profit research affiliate of NFCR that leverages charitable funding and private investments to help speed up the translation of the discoveries made in the academic labs. Dr. Ba recognizes that too many scientific breakthroughs remain on the bench and are not being translated into next-generation cancer therapies, diagnostics, and prevention strategies effectively due to the lack of seed funding.

Over the past three years, AIM-HI has funded a portfolio of Sixteen oncology startups with critical seed investments from Aim-HI and co-investors who want to “do good and do well.” The AIM-HI Fund has helped several innovative therapies enter Phase I and Phase II clinical trials.

Since 2020, the foundation has been confronted by the global pandemic. But they will remember 2020 and 2021 as a triumph of science. The fastest vaccine development program in history is not just a miracle or a coincidence—it is a story of the power of collaboration, and it is the result of tremendous amounts of investments in basic science research.

NFCR’s funding into genomic cancer research, diagnostic techniques, targeted therapies, vaccines for cancer, and other medical breakthroughs was partly the result of the foundation for creating these vaccines and treatments for COVID-19.

2022 and beyond will be the most significant years of progress against cancer. Examples of the exciting developments we expect to see in the coming years include:

- Artificial intelligence-based cancer detection technologies to reduce the number of false positives and negatives.
- New tools for gene expression mapping in a cancer biopsy to develop more effective treatments.
- New drugs capable of turning cancer cells back to normal instead of destroying them outright.

NFCR funds research to cure cancer and help keep innovative discoveries from languishing in labs. They collaborate with academia, industry, and investors to accelerate breakthroughs into treatments, ultimately saving more lives. The foundation hopes to build an even larger coalition that is instrumental to bringing the discoveries from the lab to clinics and benefit patients.

“NFCR and AIM-HI are about impact investing, and our greatest success will be when breakthroughs being made in the lab are commercialized and made readily available to patients,” says Dr. Ba. “The NFCR, together with AIM-HI Accelerator Fund, will open the door to the future—a future where no one will have to be afraid of cancer.”

In addition to her work at NFCR, Dr. Sujuan Ba is a vivid fencer. She found fencing with young people and attending fencing tournaments are good ways to decompress from her challenging jobs—and invigorating ways to keep her in high spirit and good physical shape.