

# What Do I Tell a 12-Year-old Boy Who Just Wants to Play Baseball?

**A letter from Rema Iyer, a Doctoral Candidate at Sanford Burnham Prebys**

Recently, a physician-scientist asked me a heartbreaking question:

“Do you know when a new clinical trial for synovial sarcoma might open? I’m treating a 12-year-old boy with a large tumor in his elbow. If it has spread into the joint, we may have to amputate his arm.”

Let that sink in. A 12-year-old child — possibly facing the loss of his arm — because there are still no specific cures for this rare cancer. For young patients like him, surgery (sometimes including amputation) is the only option.

This is why I chose to study synovial sarcoma.

This rare cancer is caused by a genetic accident: two normal genes fuse to form one malfunctioning protein. This abnormal fusion protein takes over the cell’s machinery to make abnormal levels of this protein, which then cause a cascading chain of events that leads to the transformation of a normal cell to a cancerous one. My lab is one of only a handful around the world working to understand the disease and, more importantly, how to stop it.

And we can’t do it without support.

The funding we receive from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is vital. It powers the research that could one day help this boy keep his arm — and his future. NIH funding not only supports my experiments — paying for the reagents, equipment and data analysis — it also helps cover essential infrastructure: rent, electricity, water and basic operational costs for administrative assistants, janitors and shipping and receiving to keep us running smoothly. NIH doesn’t cover everything; we also depend on philanthropic donations to fill in gaps.

However, NIH support extends far beyond the walls of the lab. In San Diego, it has helped launch major biotech companies like Illumina and countless two-person startups, fueling jobs, innovation and local economic growth. Federal research dollars don’t just create cures, they create thriving economies in healthy communities.

Yes, we should always strive for efficiency in all our endeavors, including government funding. However, slashing research support with a wrecking ball approach costs us far more than we save. What we need is thoughtful reform, not destruction. America’s science ecosystem — bold, world-leading and visionary — is one of our greatest assets and is what made America great in the first place.

Now if you excuse me, I'm heading back to the lab. There's a 12-year-old out there who just wants to play baseball again — and I intend to do everything I can to help make that happen.

**Rema Iyer**

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