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Biopharma executive-turned-lawmaker: Want breakthroughs? Fund research



Elaine Thompson/AP

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WASHINGTON — It was during the House special investigation into stem cell research that Democratic Rep. [Suzan DelBene](#)¹ had had enough. Still in her second term at the time of the September hearing, the Washington state congresswoman was mercilessly excoriating her Republican colleagues' decision to [investigate fetal tissue science](#)², an effort she saw as a shameful attempt to harass those engaged in medical research.

“As someone who started her career in biomedical research, I’m deeply disappointed to see the impact this panel is already having,” she said.

The panel disbanded this month, but DelBene said she continues to advocate for women’s health, in particular to protect abortion rights and to support researchers and biopharma startups.

Recently named to the House Ways and Means Committee, DelBene said her priorities include the repeal of taxes on medical devices, as well as a reduction in taxes on small businesses. She also plans to fight

against [attempts to repeal of the Affordable Care Act](#) and oppose efforts to privatize Medicare. DelBene has also been a leading advocate of increased federal funding for the National Institutes of Health.

After starting her career in research, DelBene joined the business world. She worked at Microsoft, then moved on to co-found the now-defunct Drugstore.com and later serve as CEO of a technology company called Nimble, among other jobs. STAT sat down with her in her office on Capitol Hill late last week, as she was getting ready to join Women's March on Washington.

Here are some highlights:

Tell us about your early career.

DelBene: I was a bio major in college. The first work I did was doing biomedical research in immunology, primarily. After business school, I unexpectedly ended up working at Microsoft, rather than biotech. I had been working with Peter Neuberger at Microsoft, so we both left to start Drugstore.com.

Why have you been pushing for more federal research funds?

DelBene: We are at an incredible point in time where we'll see great breakthroughs in cancer, because of the ability to do more personalized and precision medicine. We efforts using big data and information acquired from patients all over.

Now, you can see two patients that have had what was considered the same type of cancer, which in the past would have been treated the same. Now it can be more nuanced.

The dollars that we invest in research today are for basic research that will give us a result in 10 or 20 years so it's important that we also keep up our investment in basic research. If we don't keep it up consistently, we'll have less breakthroughs because new scientists aren't going to get funding. You can't just turn research on and off.

You were co-founder of the Internet of Things congressional caucus. Give us an example of what you are talking about.

DelBene: I talked to a mother who has a child who has diabetes He has a continuous glucose monitor. She is a tech engineer and has figured out a way where she can monitor her child's glucose levels on her smartphone and adjust it — even if she is out of town.

Allowing a program to work through her glucose monitor is very challenging, and how will we handle those kinds of innovations in health care policy? How will we reimburse those?

We have to understand that there are new solutions coming out that people want — drug-device combinations with software programmability. Our laws need to be up to date with the way the world works today.

How would you rate the science literacy of Congress today?

DelBene: We struggle with Congress. We have policymakers who don't understand a lot of these technologies and are very concerned about how to move forward. Our goal in the caucus is to educate lawmakers on the technologies and where things headed.

I used to be dismayed at the level of science literacy but I'm more concerned now that we have folks who aren't necessarily willing to look at facts and data to have a discussion about science whether it's in respect to climate, women's health care or other science.

Links

1. <https://delbene.house.gov/>
2. <https://www.statnews.com/2016/04/20/fetal-tissue-hearing-congress/>

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