Cancer is an insidious and all-encompassing malady, seizing not only the patient in a physical and emotional sense but also all surrounding friends and family members. I quickly understood this concept when my father passed from carcinoma of unknown primary origin. Each loss from cancer leaves a wave of grief as unique as the person lost. These waves, like the fight against cancer, are shaped by our collective advances - and failures - and reveal disparities that exist amidst cancer care, especially for those of underserved populations.

Cancer affects patients of all demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. And while cancer is ubiquitous within our population, access to oncologic care is less so. Like cancer itself, racial and socioeconomic disparities threaten patients’ bodies, and society must provide the means to excise them if we are to save lives. Healthcare policies impacting insurance coverage of underserved populations, care fragmentation patterns, as well as funding to safety-net hospitals play one of many pivotal roles in addressing systemic barriers that impede access to equitable care. Surgeons and other members of the multidisciplinary oncology team must direct their efforts at combatting cancer beyond clinical walls and within those of the legislature.

As a current research fellow, I have devoted my efforts to improving oncologic outcomes from both a basic science and public health perspective. I am currently investigating the utility of circulating tumor DNA for postoperative surveillance in solid tumors. To highlight issues that exist beyond the hospital, I have conducted database research to identify racial and socioeconomic disparities amongst underserved populations diagnosed with cancer ranging from receipt of curative therapies to timing of treatment amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and fragmented care settings.

By attending the ACS Leadership and Advocacy Summit, I will have the invaluable opportunity to further cultivate the knowledge and skillsets to better advocate for our patients. More importantly, this honorary experience will grant me the tools to collaborate with legislators as we faithfully charter the vast waters of equitable oncologic care.