

Basic Behavioral Science at NIH: A Chronology

May 01, 2006

This is a long and complicated story, so we thought a chronology of major milestones might help. Remember that what you have here is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the hours of work — the meetings, discussions, drafting, negotiating — behind each of these events.

1998

February

APS Executive Director Alan Kraut testifies on national training needs in the behavioral sciences before the Committee on National Needs for Biomedical and Behavioral Scientists of the National Research Council/National Academy of Sciences (NAS). In his testimony, he calls for the establishment of a basic behavioral science training program at the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) and notes that NIGMS is not meeting its statutory mandate to support basic behavioral science. This issue is also raised in many of APS's discussions with Congress concerning the FY 1999 budget for the National Institutes of Health.

August

The Senate Appropriations committee, in what would become something of an annual ritual, endorses the idea of behavioral science at NIGMS in the FY 1999 appropriations for NIH, saying simply:

“The Committee encourages NIGMS to support behavioral research training as part of its mandate to support basic research training in all areas of health-related research.” [S. Rpt. 105-300]

1999

April

APS testifies to Congress concerning the importance of basic behavioral research in public health, and calls for the establishment of a program at NIGMS, noting that NIGMS is not fulfilling its statutory mandate to support basic behavioral research:

NIGMS is the only national institute specifically mandated to support research not targeted to specific diseases or disorders. NIGMS does not now support behavioral science research or training, even though there is a range of basic behavioral research and training that NIGMS could be supporting in such areas as the fundamental relationships between the brain and behavior; auditory and visual perception; social processes, basic cognitive processes such as motivation, learning, and information processing; the development of research techniques, methodologies, and analyses; the behavioral underpinnings of chronic pain; and the connections between mental processes and health. We believe NIGMS should develop a basic behavioral

science research program in consultation with the behavioral science research community and other national institutes and offices. We ask the Committee to encourage development of a plan for basic behavioral science research at NIGMS.

September

The Senate appropriations committee sends the following message to NIH in its FY 2000 budget for NIGMS:

Behavioral Science Research and Training- *The Committee is concerned that NIGMS does not support behavioral science research training. As the only national institute specifically mandated to support research not targeted to specific diseases or disorders, there is a range of basic behavioral research and training that NIGMS could be supporting. The Committee urges NIGMS, in consultation with the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences, to develop a plan for pursuing the most promising research topics in this area. [S.Rpt. 106-166]*

October

The House appropriations committee sends the following message to NIH in its FY 2000 budget for NIGMS:

Behavioral Research and Training- *There is a range of basic behavioral research and training that [NIGMS] could support, such as the fundamental relationships between the brain and behavior, basic cognitive processes such as motivation, learning and information processing, and the connections between mental processes and health. The Committee encourages NIGMS to support basic behavioral research and training and to consult with the behavioral science research community and other Institutes to identify priority research and training areas. [H.Rpt. 106-370]*

2000

April

APS once again testifies on the NIH budget, asking Congress to encourage NIGMS to develop a plan for establishing a program of basic behavioral science research.

May

The Senate appropriations committee reiterates its concerns about the lack of behavioral science research and training at NIGMS in its FY 2001 budget for NIH:

Behavioral Science Research and Training- *The Committee is concerned that NIGMS does not support behavioral science research training. As the only Institute mandated to support research not targeted to specific diseases or disorders, there is a range of basic behavioral research and training that NIGMS could be supporting. The Committee urges NIGMS, in consultation with the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences [sic], to develop a plan for pursuing the most promising research topics in this area. [S Rpt. 106-293]*

2001

March

Like the movie “Groundhog Day,” APS asks Congress to continue encouraging a basic behavioral research program at NIGMS in testimony on NIH appropriations for FY 2002.

October

The Senate appropriations committee, in its FY 2002 budget for NIH, once again asks NIGMS to establish a program in behavioral science research and training:

***Behavioral science research and training-** The Committee is concerned that NIGMS does not support behavioral science research training. As the only Institute mandated to support research not targeted to specific diseases or disorders, there is a range of basic behavioral research and training that NIGMS could be supporting. The Committee urges NIGMS, in consultation with the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences [sic], to develop a plan for pursuing the most promising research topics in this area. [S.Rpt. 107-084]*

2002

April

APS to Congress: The usual.

May

Rep. Patrick Kennedy (D-RI) writes NIH acting director Ruth Kirschstein urging her to develop a behavioral program at NIGMS:

NIH has benefited greatly from Congress’ effort to double its budget. One result has been that many NIH institutes devote significant resources to behavioral science. But I believe that NIGMS should be leading these institutes rather than following them. With one of the largest budgets at NIH, the resources are in place for NIGMS to begin a systematic expansion into basic behavioral research and training...

I hope you agree this is the right direction given the context of Congressional support for basic behavioral research, the strength of NIGMS’ budget, and more importantly, the wealth of opportunities that exist in basic behavioral science and the need to bring this research to bear on the numerous physical and mental health conditions that involve behavioral factors.

June

A new, not very reassuring strategy emerges, as newly named NIH Director Elias Zerhouni responds to Rep. Kennedy, essentially saying NIGMS already does behavioral research:

As you may know, NIGMS currently support studies to examine the genetic and biochemical mechanisms underlying behavior. As in all areas of basic biomedical research supported by NIGMS, most of this research is performed using model organisms, which provide excellent opportunities to explore the fundamental mechanisms underlying complex behavior. In addition to research support, NIGMS also provides funding opportunities for research training in the behavioral sciences through its multidisciplinary Systems and Integrative Biology Training, Medical Scientist Training, and individual fellowship programs.

Zerhouni added that “NIGMS is participating in an effort led by OBSSR to explore the feasibility of supporting PhD biomedical scientists who wish to receive a Masters degree in the behavioral sciences so as to enhance their ability to conduct research in that field or in relevant interdisciplinary fields.”

July

The Senate issues its FY 2003 appropriations report for NIH, with additional encouragement for behavioral science at NIGMS:

Behavioral science research and training- As the NIH Institute most concerned with basic research, the NIGMS has provided leadership in basic research on physiological and biological structures and functions that may play roles in numerous health conditions. The Committee encourages the NIGMS to develop collaborations with other Institutes, such as the NCI and NIMH, and the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research to fund basic research to integrate physiological knowledge of predisease pathways with behavioral studies. [S. Rpt. 107-216]

August

Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-HI) writes to acting NIGMS Director Judith Greenberg asking for a response to the Senate’s FY 03 report language.

September

NIGMS Acting Deputy Director Judith Greenberg writes Sen. Daniel K. Inouye that “Except for a few fields of inquiry, behavioral studies largely fall outside of the institute’s research mission....”

November

Sen. Inouye questions Greenberg’s statement, pointing out that NIGMS’s statutory mandate “clearly calls on your institute to conduct basic behavioral science research that has significance for two or more other national research institutes.” He goes on to say that “There is a multitude of basic research in behavior that falls under your charter that would benefit from your support. Basic research in behavior is critical to the well-being of our nation, and contributes to better health and welfare on the same level as basic research in biology and biochemistry.”

Inouye also tells Greenberg that “With its sizeable budget and resources, NIGMS is in a position to be on the cutting edge of basic behavioral research and training, with new fields such as social neuroscience and behavioral genetics gaining more and more support from Congress” and reiterates the Senate’s request for a basic behavioral program at the institute.

2003

April

APS to Congress: The usual.

APS Executive Director Alan Kraut testifies on national health research training needs to the Committee for Monitoring the Changing Needs for Biomedical and Behavioral Research Personnel of the National Research Council (the later version of the NAS 1998 research training committee mentioned above). He reiterates his call for a behavioral program at NIGMS, noting that the \$1.9 billion institute spends \$0.00 on behavioral science, and questions how that is possible, given the statutory mandate, the scientific imperative, and the central role of behavior in most of the leading causes of illness and death in the nation.

Reps. Kennedy and Brian Baird (D-WA) team up to draft a “concurrent resolution” legislation that expresses the sense of Congress regarding a particular issue, in this instance “the importance of basic behavioral research and research training in advancing the health of the nation.”

August

Reps. Kennedy and Baird meet with NIH Deputy Director Raynard Kington and Acting NIGMS Director Judith Greenberg. The NIH officials insist that the NIGMS issue needs to be studied in the larger context of behavioral research at NIH overall, and inform the legislators that they intend to form a working group to carry out a study. Kennedy and Baird agree to put their concurrent resolution on hold pending the outcome of the working group’s efforts.

Reps. Kennedy and Baird follow the meeting with a letter to Kington and Greenberg to underscore their serious intent regarding a basic behavioral science research program at NIGMS. Among other things, they indicate that “The fact that NIGMS has not funded much basic behavioral research in the past ... is not [going to be] a persuasive argument that NIGMS has no role to play in behavioral science.”

Concerned that the study is intended to deflect Congressional pressure, the legislators told NIH that study or no study, NIGMS still needs to fulfill its statutory mandate to support basic behavioral science. “We accept that you will not promise any particular outcome to the review process you are initiating. You should know, however, that we will need convincing if the task force concludes that, contrary to Congress’s stated opinion and current statutory authority, NIGMS has no significant role to play in basic behavioral research and training.”

September

The chair of the Senate NIH appropriations panel, Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA), the ranking minority member, Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA), and Sen. Inouye hold a colloquy on the Senate floor to specifically get on record with the full Senate their concern about NIH’s lack of support for basic behavioral science research. They express strong support for a program at NIGMS, citing the central role of behavior in health and stressing the importance of basic behavioral research. The three Senators pledge to work together to ensure that NIH addresses the views of Congress on these issues. [*Congressional Record*, 9/10/03]

The Senate's FY 2004 report language:

Behavioral Research- *The Committee believes that NIGMS has a scientific mandate to support basic behavioral research because of the clear relevance of fundamental behavioral factors to a variety of diseases and health conditions. The Committee encourages the NIGMS to incorporate basic behavioral research as part of its portfolio, especially in the areas of cognition, behavioral neuroscience, behavioral genetics, psychophysiology, methodology and evaluation, and experimental psychology.[S.Rpt. 108-81]*

October

NIH announces it will form an ad hoc Working Group under the Advisory Committee to the NIH Director "to address issues related to NIH's support for research in the behavioral and social sciences that is fundamental to the prevention, treatment, and cure of illnesses but is not directed at a specific disease or condition." The working group was asked to examine NIH's portfolio of basic behavioral and social science research; identify areas of opportunity in basic behavioral and social science that NIH should consider supporting; and examine the barriers to the submission and peer review of grant applications in the basic behavioral and social sciences.

November

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) reorganizes its priorities, dramatically, scaling back its basic behavioral science research programs. The institute later tells the Working Group:

NIMH is re-setting priorities for its research portfolio. Three key factors are being used to evaluate new applications submitted for funding: relevance to the mission, traction for making rapid progress, and innovation. Given that some areas of basic behavioral science are far removed from rapid application to etiology, diagnosis, or interventions, how can these criteria be applied? We are placing higher priority on those basic research studies that (a) link behavior, brain, and experience and/or (b) are informed by and, in turn, informs our understanding of etiology, our need for diagnostics, and our quest for new interventions to prevent or treat mental and behavioral disorders. [Working Group report, page 92]

2004

April

The first meeting of the ad hoc Working Group of the NIH Advisory Committee to the Director on Research Opportunities in the Basic Behavioral and Social Sciences (the name alone could fill a report). Members include APS Past Presidents Susan Fiske and Robert Levenson, and APS Fellows Laura L. Carstensen, Richard Davidson, William Greenough, and James Jackson.

In his presentation to the group, Alan Kraut describes the disconnect between the central role behavior plays in health and the continued negligence of basic behavioral research at NIH. He encourages the committee in its work, and asks that they keep the nation's health needs in mind as they examine the

status of NIH's basic behavioral research activities.

November

Reps. Kennedy and Baird write to NIH Deputy Director Raynard Kington to ask for an update particularly with regard to NIGMS. Referring to their 2003 meeting, the legislators wrote:

"We were confident then that our concerns were heard and we agreed to your request to allow NIH to work through this issue by itself and not to introduce legislation. Since then, we've received little information. If anything, we are more concerned to day than we were when we last met" because NIMH is reducing its basic behavioral science portfolio. Kennedy and Baird said the change at NIMH "means that more than ever, NIGMS now must unequivocally support basic behavioral science research. In fact, we wonder why this was not addressed at the NIH level as NIMH was planning its change in emphasis."

December

The NIH Working Group issues recommendation supporting basic behavioral research at NIGMS and calling for a trans-NIH plan to bolster what the group called the "fragile" support structure for such research:

Support for basic behavioral and social science research is critical for advancing the NIH mission. Recent advances in molecular, genetic, and neural areas will create an even greater demand for advances in basic behavioral and social science research if these advances are going to be successfully translated to improving the nation's health and reducing the burden of illness. Although some basic behavioral and social science research is likely to continue to find a home in the ICs where it is seen as meshing with existing programs and priorities, other research— while extremely germane to the NIH mission— is unlikely to find a funding source under the current structure. Moreover, as the recent policy and priority shifts within ICs make clear, the current support structure for basic behavioral and social science at NIH is fragile, pointing to the need for a secure and stable home for this important research. [Working Group report, p. 11]

The Working Group's report is available online at
http://obssr.od.nih.gov/Documents/.../Report_complete.pdf

2005

May

NAS released their latest report in their series (every four years) advising NIH how to spend its research training money. In it, they called on NIGMS to support behavioral science, specifically writing that "A particularly notable omission from the list of institutes that support training in the behavioral and social sciences is the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS)" and that "NIGMS has resisted calls from Congress to develop collaborations with other institutes and centers at NIH to support

behavioral research.” They recommend that it now “incorporate the behavioral and social sciences...” [Advancing the Nation’s Health Needs: NIH Research Training Programs, National Academy of Sciences; <http://fermat.nap.edu/catalog/11275.html>] June

During the floor debate on the NIH budget for FY 06 in the House of Representatives, Rep. Kennedy issues a statement expressing his “disappointment with the lack of an adequate response from the National Institutes of Health concerning the conduct of basic behavioral research and training by the National Institute of General Medical Sciences.” Rep. Kennedy continues:

Two years ago, in August 2003, I met with the Deputy Director of NIH, and urged that he help ensure that this basic function at NIGMS receive funding. This meeting led to the formation of an advisory committee to the NIH Director. That Special Task Force reported to the NIH Director in December and recommended that basic behavioral research and training authority be funded at NIGMS. The National Academy of Sciences, in May of this year, also urged implementation and funding of this authority, particularly in research training, as such researchers will support the important advances in understanding the wide range of fundamental behavioral topics relevant to a variety of diseases and health conditions.

Basic behavioral science is critical to a comprehensive research agenda at NIH, and as several expert panels have concluded, NIGMS is the logical place to house such research and training. I intend to work with my fellow appropriators in the other body [the Senate] and with the Chairman and Ranking Member [of the House appropriations subcommittee on NIH] to see that our final bill makes sure this priority is realized. [Congressional Record, 6/28/05]

July

The Senate once again addresses basic behavioral research at NIGMS in its annual appropriations report for NIH:

Basic Behavioral Research– *The Committee notes the lack of a positive response to Congressional requests that the NIH establish a basic behavioral research and training program within the National Institute of General Medical Sciences as authorized within the statutory language establishing the Institute. The Committee notes that this recommendation was also made to the Director of NIH by a special task force created by the NIH to review this matter. The Committee believes that this research will support important advances in understanding the wide range of fundamental behavioral topics relevant to a variety of diseases and health conditions. The Committee strongly urges the NIGMS to establish a basic behavioral research and training program as part of its portfolio, especially in the areas of learning, memory, and cognition; behavioral neuroscience; behavioral genetics; the biological basis of behavior; behavior change; stress; psychophysiology; social psychology; methodology and evaluation; and experimental psychology. [S.Rpt. 109-103]*

October

In a bipartisan letter to the chair and ranking minority member of the House Appropriations subcommittee on NIH, Reps. Ralph Regula (R-OH) and David Obey (D-WI), and nine members of Congress ask that the issue of basic behavioral science research be addressed in the House-Senate

compromise on the FY 07 budget for NIH. The signers are Reps. Baird, James Leach (R-IA), Solomon Ortiz (D-TX), Pete Stark (D-CA), Henry Waxman (D-CA), Michael Honda (D-CA), Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), William Jefferson (D-LA), and Ted Strickland (D-OH). Other members of congress who are on the NIH Appropriations subcommittee agreed to weigh in individually, but customarily members don't sign letters to a subcommittee on which they serve.

December

House and Senate appropriators include a strong message for NIH in their FY 07 budget agreement:

The conferees are disappointed that the director of NIH has not yet responded to the recommendations of the ACD working group on research opportunities in the basic behavioral sciences. The conferees urge the director of NIH, in consultation with senior IC leadership and the OBSSR, to develop a structural framework for managing support of NIH basic behavioral science research. This framework should include a division of portfolio and funding responsibility among the affected ICs, and should encourage co-funded trans-institute research initiatives. The conferees request a report to the House and Senate Appropriations Committees describing the new framework and its relationship to the Office of Portfolio Analysis and Strategic Initiatives by May 1, 2006. [S.Rpt. 109-337]

2006

March

Two senior appropriators, Rep. James Walsh, R-NY and Rep. Kennedy — along with Reps. Leach and Baird, both involved in mental health research issues at NIH — write to NIH Director Zerhouni to “stress the continued Congressional interest in basic behavioral science research at NIH” and to make sure he sees the conference report language.

On the Senate side, Sen. Inouye sends a similar message to Zerhouni: “I want to express my great disappointment in your organization’s continued inattention to the [2006 appropriations conference report language],” wrote the Senator, adding that “NIH has significantly benefited from the Congressional effort to generously double its budget. With one of the largest budgets in history at NIH, I have no doubt that the basic behavioral science research program can be initiated.”

April

Rep. Kennedy presses Zerhouni during a hearing on the FY 07 budget for NIH:

Every year since 1999 – eight years in a row – this Committee has expressed its strong preference that the National Institute for General Medical Sciences fulfill that part of its mandate relating to behavioral science. The reason is clear: whether you’re talking about smoking, diet, memory, addiction, drug adherence, mental illness – behavior implicates nearly every institute’s work. And conducting basic science and training that has significance to multiple institutes is a key purpose of NIGMS.

So after eight years, I have to tell you, Dr. Zerhouni, that I'm perplexed and frustrated by NIH's apparent determination to ignore this issue. Your own task force recommended the same thing. Mr. Walsh and I along with two of our colleagues sent you a letter about this recently.

After eight years, are we finally going to see some steps towards building a basic behavioral science program at NIGMS?

Rep. Kennedy's words are a fitting cliff-hanger. Will NIH provide a meaningful plan as expected on May 1? Stay tuned to the *Observer* to find out.