

Behavioral Science is Key to NIDA Mission

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In 1995, the NIDA-supported “Monitoring the Future” annual survey found that the use of cigarettes and most illicit drugs had increased significantly among 8th, 10th, and 12th-graders over the previous year. At the same time, the perceived risk of drug use among high school students decreased and has been declining since 1991. No longer can anyone deny that drug abuse remains one of the nation’s greatest health problems. NIDA, as the largest organization in the world devoted to drug abuse research, recently instituted a number of changes to enhance its ability to respond to fast-changing trends in drug abuse, understand the behavioral and neurobiological underpinnings of drug abuse, develop prevention efforts, and discover better behavioral and pharmacological treatments for drug abuse and addiction.

In previous *Observer* issues, I have spoken about the gains conferred by the NIDA reorganization. Among them, support for behavioral science research in particular has been expanded and enhanced. The understanding of basic behavioral processes is fundamental to making any progress in curbing drug abuse and addiction. Fortunately, now as never before the behavioral sciences are in a unique position to contribute to the research base undergoing more effective prevention and treatment approaches that respond to the threat of drug abuse to the health of the public. Behavioral research can help us understand the underlying behavioral mechanisms, determinants, and correlates of drug abuse (both licit and illicit), and can aid in characterizing the harmful sequelae of drug abuse and addiction. Recent findings have shown, for example, that voucher systems in which cocaine abusers build up points during outpatient treatment to exchange for non-cash items such as YMCA passes and continuing education materials are surprisingly effective in curbing cocaine abuse in a variety of addict groups, including inner-city addicts. This approach to treating cocaine dependence focuses on behavior, creating paths for behavior change, rewarding positive change, and strengthening social relationships that reinforce healthy choices. Development of such behavior therapies would not have been possible without extensive animal and human laboratory research based on behavioral economics.

To underscore NIDA’s commitment and interest in behavioral sciences, last year NIDA established a new Behavioral Sciences Research Branch within the Division of Basic Research. Jaylan S. Turkkan, a prominent behavioral biology researcher at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, came on as Chief of the branch to guide its creation and direction (see July/August 1995 *Observer*). Turkkan has undertaken a number of new initiatives to expand the scope of basic behavioral science research in drug abuse. Following a “brain-storming workshop” that included a number of APS members, a Request for Applications was issued in August 1995 (“Broadening Basic Behavioral Sciences Research in Drug Abuse,” #96-001) to attract applications in behavioral science research areas that have been underrepresented at NIDA. Targeted research areas in the RF A (Request for Applications) included cognitive science, experimental social psychology, motivation, perception, and behavioral medicine, among others. These applications are in the review process for funding this fiscal year.

To stem the flow of young basic behavioral scientists to other fields, the Behavioral Sciences Research Branch also is gearing up to begin a B/START program. As does the National Institute of Mental

Health, NIDA will encourage young scientists to submit brief applications for grants with limited budgets and that propose focused but exploratory research plans in the basic behavioral sciences. These B/START-NIDA applications will receive an expedited review (see sidebar on page I of this *Observer*). In order to ensure that all NIDA applications from diverse areas in the behavioral sciences are expertly reviewed, NIDA also has created a Basic Behavioral Science Research Initial Review Group, which includes basic behavioral scientists from a broad array of scientific perspectives.

NIDA also is well-represented in recent changes in the behavioral sciences landscape at the NIH (National Institutes of Health), its parent agency. For example, NIDA is leading the effort to create an NIH-wide Behavioral and Social Sciences Interest Group consisting of intramural and extramural staff scientists. NIDA also is well integrated into the activities of the newly formed NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, located in the office of the NIH director, and has helped to identify future directions and generate implementation plans with the Office.

I feel confident that we *can* get a handle on drug abuse and addiction. And I know that behavioral researchers will be at the forefront in research progress in reducing the enormous costs of drug abuse to the health of the public.

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Guest Contributor