

From There to Here: Testifying Before Congress

May 01, 2007

When I defended my dissertation one year ago, I had no inkling that I'd be testifying in front of a Congressional committee soon afterward. Talk about life taking a path uncharted!

I recently had the privilege of appearing before the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations in the House of Representatives. This is the panel that oversees funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and, therefore, thousands of APS members' research. It's one of the most powerful groups in Congress.

The committee spends a good deal of its hearing season listening to testimony from the directors of various agencies, including NIH. For a few days, however, public witnesses are invited to testify, advocating face-to-face with members of Congress for a particular agency or cause. APS was fortunate to be selected to testify on the FY 08 appropriations for NIH.

APS Executive Director Alan Kraut has testified many times in the past, but this year Alan said to me, "It's your turn." I'd given many academic conference presentations and talks during my graduate career, so I figured all that practice would help me prepare for this four-minute statement (yes, only four minutes). I wrote the testimony and practiced in front of the mirror, with APS staff, in the car on a trip to New Jersey, and then practiced some more.

On the day of the testimony, I drank a lot of water, pushed my glasses up on my nose, and proudly represented APS in Congress. It was a truly awesome experience to be able to bring our issues to life in front of the Subcommittee.

In addition to live testimony, we also submitted a longer written statement that amplifies and explains our issues with regard to behavioral science and health as well as funding for behavioral science research and training at NIH. The subcommittee publishes this statement as part of the hearing record (talk about posterity!). But this isn't the end of the line. Our testimony is a platform of sorts and launches an annual cycle in which we pursue the issues we've raised in meetings with Congressional offices. We're on the Hill year-round to advocate APS' interests, and our testimony now widens those doors. With a little luck and a lot of hard work, those four minutes will lead to Congressional action.

Here's what you can say in four minutes:

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee: I'm Dr. Amy Pollick of the Association for Psychological Science. I'm a research psychologist trained at Emory University, where I studied chimpanzee communication. As you might imagine, that background comes in handy in lots of situations.

As a member of the Ad Hoc Group for Medical Research Funding, APS supports the recommendation of \$30.8 billion for NIH, to provide adequate funds for what we all agree is the world's premiere health

research agency.

I want to spend my few minutes talking about the role of behavior in health and the need for NIH research in this area. Thank you for including my more detailed written statement in the record.

So many of the Nation's health problems — heart disease, diabetes, addiction, HIV/AIDS, mental illness, and many others — have behavior at their core, either as a symptom, a cause or a way to control a condition. Sometimes changing an unhealthy or risky behavior is the only way to prevent an illness.

As with other sciences, behavioral science research and training is spread among many NIH institutes, and for some it's a core part of their mission. But today I'd like to talk about just one institute to highlight the crucial role that behavior plays in health and then come back to the need to support this research at the most basic level at a second NIH institute.

The National Cancer Institute supports behavioral research in tobacco use, sun protection, and decision making. But in a more basic science example, studies have shown that chronic stress can cause ovarian tumors to grow faster. This work illustrates how behavior can have a very real impact on biology.

Unfortunately, as this Committee has raised with NIH over several years, there is a growing gap in behavioral science at NIH that is affecting our nation's ability to adequately address the kinds of health problems I've just noted. Let me explain:

The National Institute of General Medical Sciences, NIGMS, the only NIH institute Congressionally directed to support basic research not aimed at a specific disease or disorder, has a statutory mandate to support basic behavioral research. This has become more important as institutes such as Mental Health now focus more on their own illnesses. But NIGMS only marginally supports behavior, despite this statutory mandate, despite the scientific need for such research as asserted by the National Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Medicine, NIH's own blue-ribbon task force, and despite strong urging from this Committee for many years, led by Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Walsh.

The lack of behavioral science at NIGMS is an enormous oversight. There is a huge range of fundamental NIGMS behavioral topics that could then be used in understanding the diseases at other NIH Institutes — exactly as General Medical Sciences research is supposed to be used. We know that genes and the environment interact, and what we learn about that interaction is going to inform us about schizophrenia, alcoholism, obesity, different kinds of cancers, heart disease, and more.

Let me use myself as a final example. I was born deaf and received a cochlear implant a few years ago. Medical technology alone, though, is not the reason why it's been so successful for me — it's because of basic psychological research on language and auditory processes, both inside and outside of the brain, that makes the implant work as well as it does. I simply wouldn't be speaking to you as I am today without basic behavioral science.

That's why we are again asking the Committee to direct NIGMS to develop a plan for establishing a basic behavioral science research program. This is an alliance that can reap enormous benefits for our nation's public health. So we respectfully ask the Committee to request the NIH Director to submit a report indicating the structure for scientific leadership for basic behavioral science within NIGMS.

Thank you very much. I'll be pleased to answer any questions.