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NIH Director Affirms Commitment to Basic Science Research

Collins, FS, et al. Basic science: Bedrock of progress. Science Magazine, 351:1405, 2016

Link: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27013720>

NIH-Medline Plus: NIH New Director. Summer 2009 Issue: Volume 4 Number 3 Page 2 <https://medlineplus.gov/magazine/issues/summer09/articles/summer09pg2.html>

In a brief summative letter to the Editor of Science, the Director of the National Institute of Health (NIH) Dr. Francis Collins and colleagues reaffirmed their commitment to basic science as the foundation from which discovery inexorably leads to new theories, translational research and important medical and scientific progress. Dr. Collins knows of what he speaks. Known as the “gene hunter” while at the University of Michigan, Dr. Collins led the Human Genome Project from its inception and has been named to the National Academy of Science, and the Institute of Medicine (IOM). His pedigree speaks volumes of his commitment to basic science.

The crux of the letter responds to concerned critics, that the NIH no longer prioritizes basic science. Citing a decline of applications for basic science projects, Dr. Collins states that the facts tell another story. First of all, correlation is not causation, e.g., fewer submissions for basic scientific research do not mean, nor suggest, that the NIH is less interested in basic science. The fact is, fewer applications are being submitted, which in turn, has led some to erroneously conclude that the NIH is simply not as interested in funding basic scientific research as it has been in the past.

The truth is Dr. Collins and colleagues at NIH have prioritized basic science within its broad portfolio of funded applications, including translational, population, and clinical studies.

For example, NIH has many strategic partnerships with world-class academic institutions and health centers, and wholeheartedly support the translation of basic science research into superior tools and methodologies to bridge current gaps in knowledge, and improve patient care to the degree that will improve our nation’s health. This unprecedented commitment is made possible by awards from the NIH Common Fund and administered by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS). Bottom line. NIH is, and always has been, a champion for basic scientific research.

Why Does This Matter?

The NIH commitment to translational research is advancing the frontiers of neuroscience, brain disease and developing evidenced-based clinical practice guidelines to address the current public health crisis of addictive disease and other chronic psychiatric disorders.

At present, addiction remains poorly understood when compared to other chronic, life threatening diseases such as diabetes or hypertension. With over 23 million currently addicted adolescents and adults in the U.S., and very limited resources or access to them, most will never receive the treatment they require. The human suffering, mortality and cost of untreated addiction to individuals, families, and to our nation are immeasurable. We are just beginning to understand the genetic and neurobiological mechanisms that drive this chronic illness. Yet funded scientific inquiry is not on par when compared to conditions with similar prevalence and mortality rates. So we applaud the efforts of Dr. Collins and the NIH, as well as its subsidiary organizations such as the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH).