Questions for NIH from Chairman Steve Buyer
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Committee on Veterans Affairs
April 29, 2004
Hearing on VA Research on Alzheimer's Disease,
Parkinson's Disease, and Diabetes

Question:

What are the top ten research priorities at NIH?

Answer:

Determining research priorities is a complex, multifaceted process. One cannot easily quantify the various factors and questions that surround priority setting at NIH.

NIH's mission is to conduct research that will lead to better methods of diagnosing, treating, preventing and curing disease. NIH supported research has resulted in improvements in detecting disease, better therapies, and more effective vaccines.

We remain committed to the support of basic biomedical research. The investments NIH has made in biomedical research for cancer, the neurosciences, women's health, and pediatrics, has lead to longer and better lives. Our commitment to sustaining research in Cardiovascular disease – research identifying risk factors and new therapeutic interventions to control the risks were largely responsible for a dramatic reduction in mortality from stroke and heart disease over the last half century – will result in more saved lives over the next 50 years. And while we have come very far, we have even farther to go.

In short, NIH's research priorities are shaped by the need to better understand the smallest element of human biology, which leads us to the cause of disease, and ultimately a path toward treatment. At the same time, our priorities must reflect the evolving needs of the population we serve.

- Our newest priority is the NIH Roadmap which is a modest attempt at progress. The Roadmap is focused on three goals: Identifying new pathways of discovery; Building the research teams of the future; and Re-engineering the Clinical Research Enterprise.

- NIH is increasingly targeting chronic diseases.

- We have been responding to a new epidemic – obesity.

- We have been expanding our research efforts to protect the nation against bioterrorist threats.

- The NIH has an ongoing commitment to infectious disease research, such as AIDS, SARS, tuberculosis, malaria and influenza.

- The focus on vulnerable populations and rare diseases is also central to NIH's mission, and a component in priority setting.

- We remain committed to research on other long-standing problems, such as the health disparities that exist among racial, ethnic, and disadvantaged populations.

- Since the sequencing of the human genome, we are moving forward with research into molecules and proteins to gain knowledge leading to new therapies that will alter the way medicine is practiced.

As the most influential force in the U.S. biomedical research community, NIH exercises its leadership by continually surveying public health needs and the scientific landscape to identify new biomedical research areas that require attention. Simultaneously, we search for emerging scientific opportunities.

Our processes for identifying priorities and ensuring sound science have worked well. But reassessment and adaptation should occur and lead to a priority setting process that has greater public input, is more transparent, and lead to a research portfolio that will keep NIH at the leading edge of biomedical research.