

On April 11, the Senate Labor HHS Appropriations Subcommittee held a hearing on the Fiscal Year 2020 NIH budget request. NIH Director Dr. Francis Collins' opening statement and a webcast of the hearing can be found [here](#). Witnesses included:

- Dr. Francis Collins, Director NIH
- Dr. Douglas Lowy, Acting Director, National Cancer Institute
- Dr. Griffin P. Rodgers, Director, National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases
- Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, Director, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
- Dr. Jon Lorsch, Director, National Institute of General Medical Sciences
- Dr. Richard Hodes, Director, National Institute on Aging
- Dr. Nora Volkow, Director, National Institute on Drug Abuse

Both full committee chairman Richard Shelby (R-AL) and subcommittee chairman Roy Blunt (R-MO) said they will reject President Trump's proposal to cut NIH's budget 13 percent and instead hope to increase funding for the research agency. Blunt called the proposal "disappointing" and said he's confident the committee will reject it.

Other areas discussed during the hearing include:

- Members of the subcommittee raised several concerns about the recipients of NIH grants, expressing concern that researchers may not properly disclose their affiliations with foreign countries.
  - Dr. Collins said that in some cases this involves using multiple countries as funding sources for the same research, but in other more serious cases, it could have implications for U.S. intellectual property. Dr. Collins said that the most egregious cases involved individuals taking grants that they are asked to review as part of the peer-review process and distributing those to another country even before those grants have gone through the full review process, giving an opportunity for somebody else's ideas to be stolen.
  - Dr. Collins said the FBI is currently investigating 55 research institutions involving problematic foreign ties. He did caution, however, not to carry this to the point where anybody who is a foreign national begins to feel like they are under suspicion. He said the vast majority of individual have been incredibly important and honorable contributors to our workforce.
- Several members brought up young investigators and the importance of retaining and encouraging them to stay in the field.
  - Senator Durbin (D-IL) stressed the importance of predictable and steady support for NIH, especially for young researchers.
- Senator Baldwin (D-WI) and Senator Murray (D-WA) both brought up disparities between men and women in terms of who receives NIH grants, and the underlying issues that might be holding women back from advancing in their scientific careers at the same rate as men. Both mentioned sexual harassment and the need to address it, so women aren't leaving the field. Senator Murray noted the loss of talent and the significant loss to taxpayers due to sexual harassment in the scientific workforce. She asked Dr. Collins to comment on the actions NIH is taking to address the attrition of women from the scientific community.

- Dr. Collins said that one issue is sexual harassment, which has been a particular problem in traditionally male-dominated scientific fields.
  - He indicated that one reason that female researchers were not receiving as many grants as men is that fewer are applying, noting that this is clearly an indication that there is something about the environment that is not welcoming. He said that this is something that needs to change and that the best way to do that is to get more women into leadership positions, acknowledging that six of seven NIH officials testifying were men. He noted that this is something that NIH is taking with great seriousness and they are determined to do better.
  - Senator Murray said that she wants to work with NIH to develop language for the FY20 appropriations bill that would give the NIH direction on how to address issues of sexual harassment among its grantees.
- Senator Murray also wanted to know what NCI was doing to address the fact that even with increased funding the success rate has decreased.
    - Dr. Lowey said that with the increased funding they have increased the number of awards, including the number of new applicants, but that they have also had a fifty percent increase in the number of grant applications received. While they have made more awards, they have not been able to keep up with the increased demand causing the success rate to go down. They hope to increase the success rate going forward.
- Senator Moran asked about the pediatric cancer initiative proposed in the President's budget and the challenges faced in fighting cancer in children as opposed to adults.
    - Dr. Lowey- important to understand that childhood cancer is different. There is less involvement by the private sector, so NCI has an obligation to do research in this area and has increased research in this area over the last several years. Need to aggregate and pull together data, some of which is siloed.
- Senator Murray asked about research data commons and noted that it is important that we learn from those that are further along than NIH and those that have not been successful. She wanted to know what NIH is doing to not recreate the wheel and move forward in this area.
    - Dr. Lorsch – interoperability – working closely with partners in academia and in the private sector to connect the high value sets that NIH has.
- Senator Shaheen asked what NIDA is doing that gives hope that there are additional medications and therapies on the way to address the opioid epidemic.
    - Dr. Volkow – this is an area of priority for NIDA and they are working with other institutes at NIH on medications development. She noted some exciting projects including on extended release formulations. She also said they are interested in developing new tools to reverse overdoses, something especially important when dealing with fentanyl. She also mentioned the need for research for prevention – if don't prevent will just be exchanging one drug for another.
- Senator Capito said that we don't know what the long-term impacts are on babies of opioid use and she wanted to know what NIH is doing to terms of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome.
    - Dr. Volkow said this is a priority area of the HEAL initiative – developing better treatments and understanding consequences of mothers taking opioids. She noted that NIDA is funding research in coordination with other institutes about known

interventions and also mentioned the launching of the HEALthy Brain and Child Development (BCD) Study to follow infants long term.

- Senator Lankford (R-OK) and Senator Blunt both asked about alternatives to opioids for chronic pain.
  - Dr. Collins mentioned that they are setting up a clinical trials network for people with chronic pain syndromes so new things can be tried. He also noted that pharmaceutical companies are still on board.
  - Dr. Volkow spoke about immunotherapy for the management of pain and noted that chronic pain is difficult to treat and may require a personalized approach.
  - Dr. Collins thanked Congress for identifying pain as a priority area for the \$500 million put in the Labor HHS bill each of the last two years. He said that it has allowed NIH to issue solicitations that have yielded a large amount of applications and they could not have done this on this scale without the funding.
  
- Senator Lankford also wanted to know about efforts with other agencies (DOD, NSF, VA, etc) to avoid duplication in research.
  - Dr. Collins said they have an office of portfolio analysis to look for areas of overlap. He noted that they had identified a few areas of duplication which they have addressed. He also noted that as long as they have access to abstracts this is something they can track.
  
- Senator Lankford also mentioned fetal tissue research and indicated that he would ask a question for the record on this issue.
  
- Senator Alexander (R-TN) wanted to know how the other transactional authority granted to NIH in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Cures Act is being used to help find new non-addictive pain killers.
  - Dr. Collins - essential to have this authority to move quickly in this space to create public private partnership to speed up the development of non-addictive pain medicines.
  
- Senator Blunt asked about measles.
  - Dr. Fauci – avoidable problem that is growing. Goal is to educate people about the importance of vaccinating to protect children as well as the community as a whole.
  
- Senator Murray noted the alarming increase in methamphetamine overdose and asked about NIDA's effort in this area.
  - Dr. Volkow said that the rise in methamphetamine overdose deaths is so worrisome that it keeps her up at night. She said the upward trend in meth-related overdose fatalities is particularly concerning because, unlike MAT for opioids, there is no effective therapy for meth addiction.