



**TREATMENT
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CENTER**

STATEMENT

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NIMH Failure to Research Severe Mental Illnesses Both Federal Disgrace and Personal Tragedy

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) is grossly failing in its primary task of researching the causes and treatment of serious mental illnesses. These illnesses, as defined by NIMH's advisory council, consist of schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, autism, and severe forms of depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and panic disorder. The sad truth is that NIMH shows no interest in research on serious mental disorders, instead concentrating on general research on human behavior and basic neuroscience. Much of this research is the responsibility of, and is already being done by, other federal agencies.

In our present study of the 2002 NIMH research awards, we found that only 28.5 percent of all research awards (1,187/4,157) had any relationship to serious mental illnesses. Furthermore, only 5.8 percent (242/4,157) of the awards were clinically relevant to serious mental illnesses, i.e., likely to improve the treatment or quality of life for individuals currently affected with these diseases. In other words, only 1 out of every 17 research grants currently funded by NIMH is likely to help individuals who now have these diseases.

Equally disturbing is that during the 1997–2002 period in which the NIMH budget doubled from \$661 million to \$1.3 billion, the proportion of NIMH awards for research on serious mental illnesses decreased. During that period, NIMH rejected many research applications for the study of these illnesses but funded many others unconnected to any mental disorder.

- NIMH rejected funding for research on the causes of postpartum depression but funded research on the hearing mechanism of crickets.
- NIMH rejected funding for research on why individuals with schizophrenia are unaware of their own illness, and therefore refuse to take medication, but funded research on communication among electric fish.
- NIMH rejected funding for research on the side effects of antipsychotic and antidepressant medication in adolescents but funded research on how pigeons think.
- NIMH rejected funding for a treatment trial to establish the most effective medication for individuals with a severe form of schizophrenia but funded research on how people in Papua New Guinea think.

The important question is not how people in Papua New Guinea think but how officials at NIMH think. It is known that serious mental illnesses account for 58 percent of the direct care costs of all mental illnesses, yet NIMH allocates just over 28 percent of its research resources to these diseases. It is known that 5.6 million Americans suffer from serious mental illnesses, and that on any given day approximately 250,000 of them are

living on the streets or in jail because of their mental illnesses, mostly untreated. It is known that serious mental illnesses cost the federal government alone approximately \$45 billion per year and that these costs have been rising at a rate of \$2.6 billion per year. From both a humanitarian and an economic point of view, the failure of NIMH to do research on these diseases is irresponsible.

Imagine what the public would say if it was found that fewer than one-third of all research awards from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) were going for research on cancer. And that fewer than 6 percent of the awards—1 out of 17—were likely to help anyone who today has cancer. That is the equivalent situation at NIMH today.

NIMH's failure to do research on serious mental illnesses is not news within NIMH. Last year, in fact, they undertook their own study to document the problem. We requested access to this study under the Freedom of Information Act in May 2003, but to date NIMH has refused to release it. Some preliminary data from this study that NIMH did make public suggest that NIMH's failure to do research on serious mental illnesses is at least as bad as we are reporting. In recent months, NIMH has implemented a few projects to improve its research portfolio. However meritorious, these efforts are the equivalent of a face-lift for a federal agency in need of a heart transplant.

We ask NIH Director Elias Zerhouni, DHHS Secretary Tommy Thompson, the General Accounting Office, and Congress to investigate this gross failure by NIMH to carry out its primary responsibility. NIMH's refusal to do research on serious mental illnesses is not only a waste of taxpayer funds, it is a federal disgrace and a personal tragedy for individuals affected with these diseases.

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The Treatment Advocacy Center (www.psychlaws.org) is a national nonprofit dedicated to eliminating barriers to timely and humane treatment for millions of Americans with severe mental illnesses. TAC is working on the national, state, and local levels to educate civic, legal, criminal justice, and legislative communities on the benefits of assisted treatment in an effort to decrease homelessness, jailings, suicide, violence and other devastating consequences caused by lack of treatment.