

April 5, 2007

TO: IC Directors, Deputy Directors, Executive Officers, and Communications Directors

FROM: Director, NIH

SUBJECT: Open Discourse Reiterated

I am writing to remind all NIH staff that our policies should never inhibit or suppress honest discussion of scientific issues.

The National Institutes of Health continues to be the most significant source of biomedical science information that has impact upon human health. The NIH peer review system has ensured that agency-supported research continues to be of the highest quality. Timely and accurate research results and science-based health communications are integral components of the NIH mission. Scientific staff who work in laboratories on the NIH campus and at institutions supported in all 50 states, in U.S. territories, and in more than 90 nations across the world continue to play a critical role in disseminating the scientific and medical knowledge that emanates from the NIH. This communication can be to fellow scientists at professional meetings, to patients and families, to nonprofit organizations, or to the lay public through our NIH Web site, publications, podcasts, and radio service, or through work with the public media.

As I wrote in a memo on "Open Discourse" in fall 2002, the NIH's strength lies, in part, in open scientific exchange and diversity of views. The information we release is subject to the rules governing its confidentiality, accuracy, integrity, and relevance. Manual chapter 1184 -- at <http://www1.od.nih.gov/oma/manualchapters/management/1184/> -- provides guidance for written, electronic, or oral presentation of scientific and professional information by individual employees. The framework of applicable laws for this chapter includes Standards of Conduct for DHHS Employees and other NIH Manual chapters. Additionally, Manual chapter 1185, on OMB Guidelines for Ensuring and Maximizing the Quality, Objectivity, Utility, and Integrity of Information Disseminated by Federal Agencies, notes, "For news media interviews, responses or appearances, employees are encouraged to seek advice from the relevant IC communications office or, for OD employees -- from the NIH Office of Communications and Public Liaison." The chapter describes specific requirements for official duty activities and disclaimers to use when not speaking officially.

Beyond these necessary protections and requirements for responsible management, we must encourage free and open discussion. The NIH has a long-standing policy that supports the transparency of the research enterprise and the responsible exercise of freedom to advance public debate. It is through discourse that science has been able to progress and advance to the benefit of the public and to ensure that the NIH continues to earn the public's trust by improving human health.

Please distribute this message to scientific and management officials in your IC.

Elias A. Zerhouni, M.D.