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From the Desk of the NIH Director
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Reviewing Peer Review: NIH needs your help!

Please take a few minutes to respond to the NIH Request for Information on Peer Review at:
http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-07-074.html

We all rely on the NIH peer review system to ensure that we support the best biomedical and behavioral research in the world. Today, we can all agree that the system faces challenges. These challenges include, among others, a rising number of applications, rapid changes in science, and increasingly competitive funding levels, all of which require many investigators to apply multiple times to obtain funding.

For more than half a century, the NIH peer review system has been the gold standard for funding science of the highest quality. The scientific community, including members of NIH advisory councils and Institute and Center Directors, all agree that we must continue to fund the best science and the best scientists, with a minimum of bureaucracy. And so, like all things great, our peer review system must be regularly examined, critiqued, and improved if we are to maintain its quality. We have therefore arrived at another juncture when it is time to review peer review.

The NIH Center for Scientific Review and Office of Extramural Research are working to respond to these challenges. We are making efforts to reduce review times, especially for new investigators; experiment with new formats for review; and assess the need to streamline the application, while successfully implementing electronic submission for most grants. A series of open houses to review the performance of each Integrated Review Groups (IRGs) is beginning.

We are also launching a comprehensive effort to examine the NIH peer review process, one that is broader than many previous efforts. The ultimate goal of this new study is to optimize the entire system used by NIH to support biomedical and behavioral research. We welcome suggestions about the review process *per se*, as well as suggestions regarding how to structure our grant mechanisms in order to facilitate review and reduce the need for scientists to spend more time on the application process, rather than doing science. This requires broad and comprehensive input from the scientific community. We are particularly interested in creative suggestions about how we can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the system, even if this involves radical changes to the current approach. The entire NIH leadership, including myself, has decided to make this issue a top priority for NIH this year.

And I am making a direct appeal to you to respond to our call for ideas, spread the word to your colleagues about this effort, and encourage their participation.

To help ensure we receive the most thoughtful advice possible, I recently established two Working Groups, each with differing experience and perspectives. These groups will work in concert by gathering both external and internal input.

- One group is a Working Group of the Advisory Committee to the NIH Director (ACD), our outside scientific advisors. This Working Group is led by Drs. Keith Yamamoto and Larry Tabak and will focus on gathering input from the extramural community. Members of this group (http://enhancing-peer-review.nih.gov/rosters/acd.html) will also identify a number of scientific leaders, who will be asked to serve as liaisons between various scientific communities and the Working Group. Each liaison will survey their community about the key elements of the system used to support science and ideas for change. To ensure we receive the broadest input possible on the strengths and weaknesses of the current system and ideas for improvements, this Working Group will also conduct a series of regional meetings around the country with external scientists and the broad stakeholder community. This will also be done through a web-based request for comment.
- In a parallel effort, an internal NIH Working Group, led by Drs. Jeremy Berg and Larry Tabak (http://enhancing-peer-review.nih.gov/rosters/adhoc.html), will gather input on the peer review process from the NIH community, complementing input already received from NIH staff, including NIH Institute and Center Directors.

The Working Groups Mandate for Change and Coordination with the ongoing activities in the Center for Scientific Review

The two Working Groups will then integrate their findings in the form of a white paper that will prioritize issues with the current system and articulate the best approaches towards effecting change. They have a wide-ranging mandate to examine and discuss any and all potential approaches to enhance the entire system. These ideas will then be transformed into a series of implementation pilots that will be designed to address both feasibility and effectiveness. This will take into consideration ongoing efforts recently undertaken by the Center for Scientific Review to streamline and improve the efficiency of the current peer review system by shortening review cycles, decreasing the length of the applications, and enhancing the use of electronic reviews. The final recommendations, including modifications to peer review policies and practices, will then be approved by NIH leadership, including both Institute and Center Directors, the NIH Director, and in consultation with advisory councils.

Ultimately, NIH will develop new policies that could include, for example:

1. Exploring ways to integrate a broader understanding of the scientific context into the Peer Review process;
2. Ensuring that creativity, impact, and significance are emphasized in the applications themselves, as well as in their review;
3. Improving the culture of review by encouraging the most accomplished scientists to want to serve on study sections; and,
4. Devising alternate strategies to support science that would better synergize with an enhanced peer review process while reducing the bureaucratic burden on our applicants.

Additional options will certainly emerge.

Because these issues can have an impact on the entire NIH community, I am committed to absolute transparency as NIH conducts this study and   subsequent policy development. Please visit the website: http://enhancing-peer-review.nih.gov/ for more background information and for up-to-the-minute updates as we move forward with this effort.

Thanking you in advance

Again, I urge you to participate, either by responding fully and candidly to committee members if asked, or by offering your direct input at http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-07-074.html.

Because of the level of interest in this effort, we have just extended the

closing date of the Request for Information on Peer Review to September 7.

NIH will continue to ensure that our processes serve the overarching mission of NIH — making important medical discoveries that improve health and save lives — during this unprecedented time of scientific advancement and opportunity. I know you share this goal and I am counting on your help!

I invite you to share any comments you have with me, directly, at zerhounidirect@nih.gov.

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For information about NIH programs, useful health information, and additional resources, see the NIH web site at www.nih.gov. An archive of the Director's Newsletter is available at http://www.nih.gov/about/director/newsletter/archive.htm.

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