

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

May 16, 2007

NIH FUNDING: MAKE IT A NATIONAL PRIORITY

"We are in an era of great scientific opportunity, on the brink of transforming medicine and health in the 21st Century." Elias A. Zerhouni, M.D., Director,
National Institutes of Health

Dear Colleague:

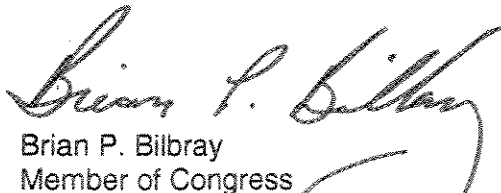
What do life-saving medications for lower cholesterol, reduced blood pressure, and breast cancer treatment have in common? Answer: they all started out as basic research ideas funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

The National Institutes of Health, often called the crown jewel of the federal government, has been involved in nearly all the medical and health discoveries of the past century. As we progress into this new and exciting millennium, NIH is working on providing answers to our most puzzling scientific problems including cancer, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

Unfortunately, in the past few years funding for the NIH has dropped dramatically. Since 2003, funding for medical research conducted and supported by the NIH has declined by thirteen percent (in inflation-adjusted terms). This means fewer chances of finding a treatment or understanding for conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and stroke, just to name a few.

As co-chairs of the Congressional Biomedical Research Caucus, we want to bring to your attention an opinion editorial that appeared in the May 4, 2007 edition of *The Washington Times*. This piece highlights the dangers of recent NIH funding cuts. We hope you will read it and appreciate why Congress should do all it can to provide NIH with the resources it needs to help transform medicine and health in the 21st century.

Sincerely,


Brian P. Bilbray
Member of Congress


Lois Capps
Member of Congress


Mike Castle
Member of Congress


Rush Holt
Member of Congress

Unhealthy cuts

Published May 4, 2007

We'd call the National Institutes of Health a kind of national treasure, except that it is more than that. The institute and its 27 components pay dividends every day in saved lives and medical innovations via important basic research. That's why we're so troubled at President Bush's proposed budget cuts for NIH in 2008. Congress is in the midst of a series of hearings on the subject. We're awaiting the hackles.

Mr. Bush has proposed a \$529 million cut over 2007 levels, for a total 2008 budget of \$29.8 billion. Even considering that \$300 million of this figure is a transfer to the Global AIDS fund, the resulting cut is unacceptable. Remember, the \$29.8 billion represents a very large swath of the country's basic scientific research, and some of its most productive, on a wide range of research areas, from heart disease to cancer research to the human genome and more.

In a recent Senate appropriations panel hearing, Sen. Arlen Specter, Pennsylvania Republican, called it "scandalous" that the nation spends less than \$30 billion on basic research when the benefits are so manifest. We second that description. NIH funding is an investment in our collective future. It underwrites basic research that, in many cases, the private sector cannot or will not undertake. Its role as a kind of national medical loss leader opens the door to further advances.

As NIH Director Elias Zerhouni pointed out, NIH funding works out to roughly \$44 a year per American. What a small price for so much. Sure, every agency head can point to critical work in a bid for more funding. But NIH can actually demonstrate the benefits.

The larger story here is that the bipartisan consensus on robust NIH funding has fallen apart over the last four years. What happened? Funding doubled over the period 1998-2003. But beginning in 2004, it flatlined and began to drop. The current budgetary pressures, including the war on terror, are no doubt part of the explanation. But so is a simple loss of public interest, which has prompted a drop in focus from the White House and Congress. This is puzzling. It is not as if the state of cancer in America, to take one example, warrants the drop. Are Americans simply too busy worrying about other threats to their well-being?

Whatever the reason, the underlying facts warrant a substantial budget increase, not a deep cut. Congress has a key role in the coming weeks. It should safeguard full funding for the National Institutes of Health.