Dear Dr. Collins:

I am writing on behalf of the American Physiological Society (APS) concerning the recent recommendation of the Scientific Management Review Board (SMRB) that the National Center for Research Resources (NCRR) should be eliminated so that the National Center for Advancing Translational Science (NCATS) can be created. Before these recommendations are implemented, we strongly urge you to clearly delineate their consequences, specifically with regard to the effects of the proposed reorganization on current translational research efforts and the extant programs of NCRR.

The establishment of NCATS should not detract from current translational research efforts being carried out by individual ICDs. Physiologists support your emphasis on translational research. Physiology as a discipline has much to offer with regard to questions such as how molecular mechanisms relate to functioning of cells, organs and whole organisms. The successful translation of research findings into new therapeutics will require collaborations among basic, translational and clinical scientists. While creating a separate center for translational research may expedite some aspects of translation, isolation may hinder collaboration between disciplines. Such collaborations can occur more readily when translational research is integrated into the activities of the institutes, centers, and divisions (ICDs). Thus, one important question concerning the NCATS proposal is how NIH can maximize the potential benefits of a separate center while minimizing unintended negative effects on other ICDs. Further, at a time when resources are limited, the creation of a new bureaucratic structure could further strain budgets and reduce funds available for the basic research upon which you hope to build.

Broad-based NCRR research support programs do not belong in a categorical institute where funding levels may suffer or access might be restricted. NCRR programs are highly-prized within the research community because they provide critical cross-cutting resources. Some NCRR programs should be transferred to NCATS, while others might best be relocated to the National Institute for General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) or the Office of the Director. This is important because NCRR program groupings will function better if they are kept intact rather than dispersed across institutes.

Maintaining the SEPA program intact should be a priority during the reorganization of NCRR. NCRR’s Science Education Partnership Awards (SEPA) program supports NIH’s broad goals of improving K-12 science education and increasing the number of students in traditionally underrepresented minority
communities who pursue research careers. SEPA provides funding for unique initiatives that bring together scientists and educators, increasing science literacy, and improving access to quality science education among students across the country. Synergy plays an important role in SEPA programs. For example, the APS is currently running an online teacher course that is comprised entirely of teachers from other SEPA programs. It would be a grave mistake to disseminate SEPA projects across multiple ICDs because that would make it more difficult to develop multi-disciplinary and collaborative projects. The best option for restructuring would appear to be transferring the entire SEPA program to NIGMS. The interdisciplinary nature of the K-12 STEM education makes it essential to keep the program intact regardless of where its new placement may be.

NCRR’s Division of Comparative Medicine (DCM) should be maintained intact during reorganization. The DCM plays an essential role in supporting the research pursuits of all the other ICDs and the expertise and experience of the DCM staff is an important resource. DCM programs help researchers obtain high-quality, disease-free animals that are critical to many NIH supported research programs; access specialized animal research facilities including the National Primate Research Centers; support repositories that facilitate the sharing of biomaterials ranging from viruses, bacteria, fungi, and cell lines to genetic stocks; enable institutions to upgrade their animal facility infrastructure; and support specialized training for laboratory animal veterinarians. These programs have enabled US researchers to achieve and sustain excellence in research and have also supported a global presence in efforts to improve lab animal science and animal welfare. There is growing support in the research community for the idea of transferring DCM to the new NCATS, which is consistent with a broad vision of what translational research entails, and the APS supports that position. NCATS is probably the best place to relocate the DCM, but the most important point is to keep the division together no matter where it ultimately resides.

The APS is a professional society, founded in 1887 dedicated to fostering research and education as well as the dissemination of scientific knowledge concerning how the organs and systems of the body work. The Society has approximately 10,000 members who conduct research at colleges, universities, medical schools, and other public and private research institutions across the U.S. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) supports the research of many APS members, who will thus be directly affected by the decisions both to eliminate the NCRR and the creation of NCATS. The APS Frontiers in Physiology program, which builds connections between the research and K-12 teaching communities, has benefitted from the SEPA program. Established in 1990, Frontiers is a summer research program that integrates scientific inquiry and technologies into the classroom by providing teachers with mentored research experience and professional development.

The APS urges you to give consideration to our suggestions about what must be done to ensure the future success of NIH-funded translational research as well as NCRR’s vital research support programs.

Sincerely,

Peter Wagner, MD
President
American Physiological Society

cc: Dr. Lawrence Tabak
    Dr. Alan Guttmacher
    Dr. Kathy Hudson