The American Physiological Society Statement on FY 2009 Funding for the Veterans Affairs Medical and Prosthetic Research

The American Physiological Society (APS) thanks the Subcommittee for its ongoing support of Medical and Prosthetic Research at the department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Research that specifically addresses the medical needs of veterans is an important component of VA health care. The VA health care system currently faces many challenges, including both an aging veteran population and the needs of veterans who are returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan. The medical problems facing many new veterans simply cannot be adequately treated with current medical and psychological understanding and technology. In FY 2008, Congress added emergency funds to the VA medical and prosthetic research budget, bringing it to a total of $480 million. If enacted, the Administration’s budget would reduce funding for medical and prosthetic research programs at the VA by nearly 8% ($38 million), bringing the funding down to $442 million in FY 2009. The APS commends Congress for increasing the budget allocation for VA medical and prosthetic research in FY 2008 and urges you to make every effort to provide the VA with $555 million in FY 2009, with an additional $45 million for building and infrastructure development.

The APS is a professional society 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 was founded in 1887 and now has more than 10,000 member physiologists. Our members conduct research at colleges, universities, medical schools, and other public and private research institutions across the U.S., including VA facilities. The APS offers these comments on the budget recognizing both the enormous financial challenges facing our nation and the enormous opportunities before us to make progress against disease.

VA medical research facilities across the country provide veterans access to state-of-the-art medical care. The focus of the VA research program is medical problems that affect veterans, and many VA researchers are also practicing physicians who treat veterans. Priorities in the VA budget include research into combat-related injuries (traumatic brain injury, amputation and prosthetics, post-traumatic stress disorder), mental health (combat-related, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, depression, and dementia), personalized medicine, care for chronic conditions and long-term care for older veterans.

The medical problems listed above are more prevalent among veterans than the general population, but others such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, Alzheimer’s Disease, and osteoporosis are typical of any aging population. New treatments developed at VA medical centers as a result of research in the VA Health Care System have led to
healthcare improvements not only for veterans but for all Americans. Moreover, the opportunity to combine research and patient care enables the VA to recruit and retain outstanding clinicians. In addition to focusing on research and patient care, VA medical researchers also educate the next generation of physician-scientists. Currently, more than half of all practicing physicians in the US receive some of their training at a VA facility.

The proposed budget for FY 2009 would result in cuts to several critical research programs, including Acute and Traumatic Injury, Central Nervous System Injury and Associated Disorders, Diabetes and Major Complications, Mental Illness, Sensory Loss and Substance Abuse. In most cases, funding for these areas would fall to levels lower than in FY 2007. With an increasing number of veterans requiring care for conditions that are directly relevant to the research areas listed above, we cannot afford to fall behind in our research efforts.

The APS joins the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) and the Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA) in calling for an increase in the VA medical and prosthetic research to $555 million for FY 2009, with an additional $45 million to be spent on facilities and major equipment. This level of investment is necessary in order to sustain the research enterprise at the VA, which will result in better medical treatment for our veterans and all Americans.