



January 24, 2006

David Schwartz, MD, Director
National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences
National Institutes of Health
Via Website

Dear Dr. Schwartz:

On behalf of the American Psychological Association, I appreciate your publishing your strategic plan for NIEHS and accepting comments on it.

NIEHS has a critical mission: to understand how people's interaction with their environment impacts health and disease. Endogenous factors, such as genes, age, and sex, interact in various ways with exogenous factors, including exposure to chemical pollutants in the air, water, and soil, to affect peoples' health. The draft plan appears to emphasize the study of cellular-level changes resulting from environmental exposures. This type of work has always been a focus of NIEHS. But there are critically important exogenous, or environmental, factors that barely make an appearance in the draft strategic plan. The physical environment, including neighborhood characteristics, is a critical pathway through which pollutants are delivered to the body. Diet is another pathway. The behavior of individuals and groups mediates the exposure of people to their environment(s). NIEHS will be unable to fulfill its mission without encouragement and funding of behavioral and social sciences research to characterize and understand the interactions between people and their physical and social environments.

NIEHS has funded some innovative research in the past few years that appears to have no home within the current draft of your strategic plan. NIEHS's major contribution to NIH's Strategic Plan on Obesity was an RFA to improve research on how the built environment affects obesity and the effectiveness of changes in community planning, design, and development in reducing the extent of obesity and associated comorbidities. The intervention research projects funded under this RFA are developing tools to characterize and measure individual and population-level indicators of healthful communities – and of residents' lifestyles and behaviors – that prevent or reduce obesity. The behavioral research community was excited about this initiative because it represented a scientific direction practically unprecedented at NIH, and reflected NIEHS's desire to take a trans-institute leadership role in understanding behavioral interactions critical to health. We hope to be reassured that NIEHS is not backing away from that innovative leadership.

The draft plan on page 8 cites a focus on research on the pathways through which oxidative stress and inflammation damage health. This is an area in which behavioral research needs to play a critical role. One example is the interdisciplinary work on psychoneuroimmunology, which has shown how the experience of stress affects immunity. Psychologists' work on the theory of allostatic load is relevant to NIEHS's interest in this topic.

Behavioral and social sciences research has contributed significantly to improving the precision of measures and methods to document and track exposures over the human lifespan and during developmentally sensitive periods (like in utero exposures or exposures during adolescent phases of life). In addition, behavioral scientists are working with new informatics and communications technology to improve reliability, validity and representative sampling of self report measures. An example is the work of Saul Shiffman and Arthur Stone on Ecological Momentary Assessment devices.

APA is heartened by the mention on page 6 that NIEHS intends to continue its focus on environmental contributions to health disparities in minority populations. We are also encouraged that NIEHS has laid the groundwork for expansion of its commitment to research on behavioral neuroscience. A workshop held in April, 2004, brought together experts in behavioral neurotoxicology and behavioral genetics to discuss the ways that these new methods could advance the field of behavioral neurotoxicology and establish a more mechanistic basis for the role of toxic exposure in behavior and in cognitive deficits.

This association is interested in working with NIEHS to identify psychological scientists with appropriate expertise to work with your institute on these and other topics. For additional information, please contact Pat Kobor, Sr. Science Policy Analyst, at pkobor@apa.org. We appreciate the opportunity to submit comments on the draft strategic plan.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Breckler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Steven J. Breckler, PhD
Executive Director for Science
American Psychological Association