



Statement of Dr. Steven Breckler before the Scientific Management Review Board  
April 28, 2009

Mr. Chairman and members of the Board, my name is Steve Breckler and I am Executive Director for Science at the American Psychological Association. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about the question of whether or not a merger of NIAAA and NIDA should be studied. Psychological scientists have been intimately involved in the study of alcohol, tobacco and illicit substance use at many levels. In his letter of February 23, APA's CEO, Dr. Norman Anderson, outlined the role of psychologists in these areas. I believe you have that letter in your preparation materials so I won't elaborate further.

The American Psychological Association fully supports the assertion that any proposed consolidation of NIH institutes or centers should be driven by scientific considerations. Because this is the first meeting of the Board, we believe it is important that any merger discussion be framed with the intent to "do no harm". The approach should demonstrate how and why the research would be better if institutes were consolidated. If there are administrative cost savings anticipated with a merger, the Board must be vigilant in asking whether the savings are to be achieved at the expense of the research.

We know that the reorganization of NIH has been examined previously. Indeed, the idea of studying this particular merger was recommended by a National Academy of Sciences report in 2003. It is now six years later, but much of the insight of that report is still relevant. In summarizing the response to its charge, the committee acknowledged that "...both the nature of the charge and the 1-year period allowed for deliberations put important constraints on the development, character and scope of the recommendations that could be credibly put forward." That's why the Academy report recommended an "investigative committee", in anticipation of this very Board which was created as part of the NIH reauthorization act of 2006. The intent is to engage in regular, thoughtful review and deliberation of organizational, budgetary and operational issues that might improve the function of NIH.

The Academy's 2003 report provided some examples of what an investigative committee might do. Importantly, one of those was "Gathering input and opinion from the IC Directors...". This strikes us as a reasonable process recommendation, and raises for us an important question: Although nine institutes and centers are represented here, why would the SMRB initiate such a study at a point in time when neither NIH nor NIAAA have permanent leadership? Although the Board is charged with reporting recommendations to the NIH Director, as yesterday's discussion demonstrated, the NIH Director is clearly meant to exercise an active role in the deliberations of the SMRB. Might it not be wiser to wait until those important positions are filled before taking up the question before you now?



The 2003 study also suggested examining a merger of NHGRI and NIGMS, but acknowledged that the Committee "...did not have the time or opportunity to review the merits of all such proposals to the extent that they deserve". Yesterday, the Board received a presentation summarizing the 2003 report and that report produced a number of valuable recommendations that have already been implemented but I'd note that the actual report gave equal weight to the proposed NIDA-NIAAA and NHGRI-NIGMS mergers, yet the latter appeared to be given short shrift yesterday and there was no discussion of why the Board agenda was favoring one over the other. With respect to the proposed NIAAA and NIDA merger, the 2003 report stated that "the broader scientific relationship and physical location of these two institutes with other neurosciences institutes (especially NIMH and NINDS) should also be considered." We found it noteworthy that Mr. Augustine added a third, impromptu, agenda item for consideration: If NIH didn't exist at all how would you design an organization to do what NIH does from ground zero? Now might be the time to do that, a task that the NAS committee admittedly did not have time to do, by taking a fresh look at the entire network of NIH institutes and centers rather than focusing on just one pair of institutes.

From a scientific perspective, we understand why the Board might want to focus on a possible merger of NIAAA and NIDA. They appear to share missions and foci that make them logical candidates for a merger. This is where the broader NIH context really needs to be taken into consideration. The value of the NIH model of multiple institutes is that they support diverse approaches to understanding interrelated problems. For example, although NIDA supports the lion's share of NIH research on tobacco use and smoking, NCI has a substantial tobacco research portfolio too. If an "addictions" institute were to be created out of the merger of NIAAA and NIDA, would the NCI tobacco research portfolio move there as well? The point is that the contemplation of a merger between two institutes is likely to have far broader implications across NIH, and that needs to be anticipated before going down this road.

I know that you do not need to be reminded of the NIH mission, which includes the support of "...science in pursuit of fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to extend healthy life and reduce the burdens of illness and disability." From a public health perspective, a study such as the one you now contemplate would require a thorough re-examination of how the current allocation of NIH research resources maps onto the leading causes of morbidity and mortality. Alcohol and tobacco dependence are among the leading causes of death and disability, and so you will need to anticipate how such a study might have broad ramifications for the apportionment of funding to the disadvantage of many other institutes and centers across NIH. On the surface, the proposed study may seem straight forward and focused, but in fact it may be the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

We know that the Board is taking their charge very seriously in making a decision about the proposed study. For APA, it is the details, the priority of the research, and leadership that will make a merger successful or have a detrimental effect. Unless the scientific benefits to a merger are real and measurable, they may not justify the risks to the budget and support we know exists now. So the question we'd ask the Board is, do they really have enough information to invest their valuable time and resources into the consideration of a selective merger of any two institutes to the exclusion of others or other potential organizational constructs that should be the Board's primary focus?