

UNC

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
BOWLES CENTER FOR
ALCOHOL STUDIES

Dear SMRB,

I have been asked by the Research Society on Alcoholism to comment on how a merger of NIAAA to NIDA would impact the research of the Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. I am Director of the Bowles Center and the John Andrews Distinguished Professor and a Professor of Pharmacology and Psychiatry. I am also Principle investigator of an NIAAA P60 Alcohol Research Center in its 12th year of funding and an Alcohol Research training grant in its 11th year of funding. Our Center is focused on alcohol related pathologies. My faculty believe that a merger of NIAAA and NIDA will decrease alcohol research on health and have a negative impact on alcohol research.

Our alcohol research center has always included components working on fetal, liver, and brain pathology. Cellular and molecular mechanisms of alcohol pathology involve oxidative stress mechanisms and immune gene expression that contribute to various pathologies. My faculty have been funded by NIDDK, childhood disorders, NIMH, NIA, NIEHS and other institutes, but to my knowledge no faculty member in our Center has ever been funded by NIDA. A merger would reduce research on alcohol and health.

If institutes are merged research on alcohol induced liver disease will stop. Liver pathology researchers have already begun to shift their efforts to NASH, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis, funded by NIDDK. A merger will largely end fetal alcohol research, a major part of the NIAAA portfolio. FAS scientists will shift to other teratogens funded by NIEHS or childhood disorders or to nutritional deficiency teratogenic disorders. Alcohol brain pathology scientists at our center focus on anxiety, depression and alcohol induced neurodegeneration. Our focus is not on dependence, but more on mental psychopathology induced by alcohol. Some would write NIDA grants, however, most would continue to the focus on pathology and stop studying alcohol. Neurodegeneration and/or psychopathology are funded through NIMH, NIA and NINDS. Alcohol brain pathology research will suffer in a merger.

Most Americans drink alcohol. Alcohol is unique in being both a drug and a food. Understanding the health impact of alcohol is important to guide public policy to improve the health of Americans. A merger of NIAAA and NIDA will reduce research on alcohol and health.

Our faculty in Family Medicine are working on screening and brief intervention and treatment for heavy drinking as a risk for health. The effort is similar to measuring blood pressure for risk of CV disease and weight for risk of diabetes. Heavy drinking has health risks for oral cancers, liver disease, mental disorders, and likely many other unknown negative health risks. Efforts for primary care physicians directed at alcohol related risk of disease will be lost in drug addiction criminal justice issues.

Our clinical trials on medications to reduce drinking recruit heavy drinkers, often not seeking treatment, through the newspapers. Most are employed and do not use drugs of abuse. The goal to reduce heavy drinking, relapse to heavy drinking and total numbers of drinks per week are markedly different from stimulant abstinence or opiate substitution therapy. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are separate volunteer support groups that highlight the

differences between alcohol and stimulant-opiates. Thus, clinical prevention and therapeutic efforts on healthy levels of alcohol drinking will suffer from a merger of NIAAA to NIDA.

Finally, a merger will reduce alcohol research training. The food component of alcohol, e.g. calories, the volume of alcohol consumed and animal aversion to alcohol make research on alcohol particularly unique and complicated. These complexities and others make it very difficult for people not trained in alcohol research to do alcohol research. A merger will shift the emphasis to drug abuse and training in alcohol research will suffer leading to a loss of alcohol research expertise.

In summary, a merger will negatively impact alcohol research on health. Alcohol is consumed by most Americans. It is important to know the impact of alcohol on health to guide public policy to improve the health of Americans.

Thank you for the opportunity to express these thoughts.

Sincerely,



Fulton T. Crews
Professor of Pharmacology and Psychiatry
John R. Andrews Distinguished Professor
Director, Bowles Center for Alcohol Studies