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December 17, 2009

Norman Augustine, Chairman
Scientific Management Review Board
c/o Dr. Amy Paterson, Director
Office of Science Policy
Building 1, Room 103
9000 Rockville Pike
Bethesda, MD 20892-0160

Dear Mr. Augustine:

I am writing in my capacity as Chairman of the American Gastroenterological Association (AGA) to express our concerns with the proposal currently being considered by the SMRB to merge NIDA and NIAAA into a single institute. The AGA is the nation's oldest not-for-profit medical specialty society, and the largest society of gastroenterologists, representing more than 17,000 physicians and scientists who are involved in research, clinical practice, and education on disorders of the digestive system. There are several reasons for our concern.

First, we see no scientific benefit that might result from such a merger. AGA members – many of whom are also members of the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases – conduct important research on the end-organ damage consequences of alcohol. We are very concerned that the opportunity to conduct such research will be lost with a merger.

Secondly, we believe that scientific research will actually suffer. NIAAA is the primary source of funding for extramural liver research on the impact of alcohol. It has funded investigators who have made seminal discoveries in the field. Among them are discoveries that have taught us much about Nonalcoholic Fatty Liver Disease (NAFLD), one of the principal harms found in obesity.

Advancing the Science and Practice of Gastroenterology

Thirdly, NIAAA is the only institute funding work in the impact of alcohol on patients with hepatitis B and hepatitis C. These two viruses afflict as many as five million Americans (most of whom are undiagnosed). They represent a major public health threat whose risk is exacerbated by alcohol consumption.

Finally, AGA is concerned about the impact of the consideration of this merger on young investigators currently deciding whether or not to enter the field. The level of uncertainty that has been created by this consideration could result in the loss of a substantial amount of intellectual capital from the field of alcohol liver research.

For all these reasons, the AGA respectfully requests that the SMRB bring this issue to a final resolution at the earliest possible date with a recommendation to reject the merger of these two institutes.

Thank you for your consideration of our recommendation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert S. Sandler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "R".

Robert S. Sandler, MD, MPH, AGAF
Chairman