

December 3, 2003

The Honorable Orrin G. Hatch
Chairman
Senate Committee on the Judiciary
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Hatch:

The Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), a coalition of 22 scientific societies representing more than 65,000 biomedical researchers, wishes to express our growing concern over restrictive new visa policies. We are aware that the Senate Committee on the Judiciary has been holding a number of hearings exploring visa issues. Because scientific research and education are international in nature, FASEB has been closely following the impact of new visa policies on the research enterprise. As such, we read with interest the recent report issued by the Institute of International Education (IIE), which detailed a decrease in the number of foreign students enrolled at American universities.

Scientific advancement depends upon researchers' ability to collaborate, to share discoveries and to train the next generation of young scientists. The network that supports these activities extends worldwide, and policies that interfere with this interaction also interfere with the progress of science and medicine. The Human Genome Project, completed earlier this year, was a triumph of scientific discovery and is likely to transform our understanding of diseases and their treatment. It was also a powerful example of international collaboration, as scientists from three continents worked together to decipher the human DNA code. A recent article on the front page of the *Washington Post* (enclosed), highlighted the fact that more than one-third of American Nobel Prize winners are foreign born. Moreover, important medical treatment centers, like the Mayo Clinic, benefit from foreign scientists and physicians who are willing to bring their expertise to the United States.

In order to foster medical progress, it is imperative that undergraduate and graduate students in science and medicine, as well as postdoctoral trainees, are able to study at US universities and academic institutions. It is here that they meet future collaborators in their fields; it is here that their mentors guide them in the ethical conduct of research; and it is here that they contribute to US progress in biomedicine. Although we have heard anecdotal evidence from our members that post-September 11th visa policies have affected their ability to attract foreign students to their institutions and labs, the IIE report is the first quantitative evidence that we are facing a serious problem.

Stifling the capacity for foreign students and scientists who are studying in the US to travel to international scientific conferences is a second area of potential concern. Professional meetings are an integral part of the scientific process: they are a place for researchers to present preliminary findings, and receive feedback from their peers; meetings provide students with a forum to practice defending their ideas and presenting their data; and they are the nurturing, intellectual arena from which the seeds of international collaborations are germinated. Visa policies that make it difficult for students and scientists to participate in these meetings can, quite simply, bring the rapid progression of science and medicine to a grinding halt. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) is currently conducting a study on the effects of changes in the visa system which may provide more concrete information as to their impacts on scientific meetings. FASEB awaits the results of that study with great interest, and we hope that your committee will give it careful scrutiny.

The scientific and biomedical research community is concerned about the security of our nation and the safety of our inhabitants. Hundreds of our societies' members are dedicated to combating bioterrorism by developing vaccines, conducting research to fight dangerous pathogens, working on chemical and biological sensors, as well as a multitude of other projects aimed at strengthening the protection of our homeland. We understand the need for reevaluating or modifying our visa and immigration system to protect our citizens. However, there is also a critical need to battle the disease and injuries that hold millions of our citizens hostage through suffering and pain. Medical advancement thrives in an environment that cultivates open exchange of science and education. Based on the IIE report, we are not encouraging such an environment, and this may ultimately lead to us losing the best and brightest students and scientists to other nations.

FASEB applauds the Senate Committee on the Judiciary for their careful consideration and continued interest on this critical issue. As you move forward in your investigations of the current visa system, we urge you to weigh the need for improvement with the equally important need for a transparent, expeditious, and predictable system. For example, the recent decision by the State Department to extend the validity of the Visa Mantis clearance to 12 months is a positive step in the right direction.

Thank you for your consideration of our views on this highly important topic. If you have need of additional information, or for FASEB to provide testimony, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Robert D. Wells, Ph.D.
FASEB President