November 8, 2007

Elias Zerhouni, M.D.
Director, National Institutes of Health
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Bethesda, MD 20892

Barbara M. Alving, M.D.
Director, National Center for Research Resources
National Institutes of Health
One Democracy Plaza, 9th Floor
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Dear Drs. Zerhouni and Alving:

On behalf of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), I would like to thank the National Institutes of Health (NIH) for its commitment to clinical and translational research. As an organization representing 21 biomedical research societies and 80,000 basic and clinical investigators, FASEB understands both the importance and the challenges of translating fundamental research findings into medical advances and improved patient care. We support NIH’s goal to boost the efficiency and pace of these investigations.

The success of the biomedical research enterprise depends in large part on our ability to recruit and retain highly qualified scientists. For this reason, we applaud the NIH Clinical and Translational Science Award (CTSA) program’s emphasis on training and mentoring clinical investigators. Through its support for research, education, training, and career development activities, the CTSA program seeks to advance and nurture the next generation of clinical investigators. As with any new initiative, however, it will be important to determine whether the program is meeting its goals. We agree, therefore, that CTSA applicants should describe a plan for tracking and evaluating the progress of their training and career development award recipients. Moreover, we recommend that NIH and CTSA institutes, centers, and departments (ICDs) work together to standardize the collection of this information. This will be necessary for gauging the overall success of CTSA training activities and, more importantly, for making programmatic improvements in the future.
FASEB encourages NIH to implement and fund a mechanism to track the career progress and outcomes of trainees. In addition to collecting data on the demographic and professional characteristics (e.g., gender, degree, research area) of trainees, we recommend studying the factors that may affect their career progress, such as access to research funding and facilities, the availability of research collaborators, and the quality of mentoring they receive. It is also important to examine how much time investigators are able to contribute to research, patient care, teaching, and administrative activities across their careers using established performance metrics (e.g., work Relative Value Units or teaching contact hours). This will allow us to develop a better understanding of the evolution of productive research careers and the factors that may reduce one’s likelihood of success. Finally, it is critical that we understand the long term contributions that trainees make to the enterprise. While traditional measures of success, such as academic appointments, grant support, publications, and patents should be examined, it is important to consider the full spectrum of research and employment settings. Therefore, we suggest that outcome measures take into account employment and research contributions in, and grant support from, government, private, and academic sectors.

To determine whether the CTSA program’s training activities have been truly transformative, they must be considered in relation to those of non-CTSA institutions and, if possible, to NIH’s earlier clinical training and career development awards. Understanding the impact of NIH’s current portfolio will provide critical baseline data with which to guide the development of successful programs in the future. We hope that NIH will make the information garnered from these analyses available to the community as quickly as possible so that we may work together toward strengthening the research enterprise.

Thank you again for your dedication to clinical and translational science. Please do not hesitate to contact me if FASEB can be of assistance to NIH as it plans for the next phase of the CTSA era.

Sincerely,

Robert E. Palazzo, Ph.D.
FASEB President

cc:
Dr. Norka Ruiz Bravo, Director, Office of Extramural Research, National Institutes of Health