

Should NIH Change Its Name?

By Eugene Garfield

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Readers of *The Scientist* by now should be familiar with the aims of Research!America, the Alexandria, Va.-based national nonprofit advocacy organization for biomedical research that was founded in 1989. Chairing its annual membership meeting on March 12, former Congressman Paul Rogers discussed the remarkable progress Research!America has made in advancing the cause of biomedical research. Mary Woolley, the organization's president, reported on the public's increased awareness of the need for greater funding of biomedical research (M. Woolley, *The Scientist*, March 18, 1996, page 10).

This grass-roots awareness has become apparent to both Republican and Democratic members of Congress. While the latter have been the traditional boosters of National Institutes of Health funding, some Republicans have recently taken up the cause with great fervor. Republican members of the House of Representatives such as John E. Porter (Illinois), as well as Sens. Arlen Specter (Pennsylvania) and Phil Gramm (Texas), among others, have declared their support for major increases in NIH funding. Indeed, it is President Clinton who has become the conservative on this truly bipartisan issue.

One of the key findings of surveys sponsored by Research!America is that there is a widespread lack of public recognition of the role that NIH plays in funding biomedical research. When asked who provides this support, less than 10 percent of respondents can

identify or even recognize the name "National Institutes of Health." Many respondents believe that medical schools fund all their own biomedical research! (To request more information on Research!America's surveys, the E-mail address is kerisperry@aol.com. The organization's Web site is <http://www.nicom.com/~ramerica>. The mass media are partly to blame for the public's ignorance. When covering biomedical research breakthroughs, television and the press rarely acknowledge NIH as the source of funding. And when scientists are interviewed by the media, they are rarely given the time to acknowledge their funding sources. Or if they do, it winds up on the cutting-room floor. Simply put, the NIH-medical school connection is lost in the journalistic process. Even members of Congress are similarly uninformed. Some think that NIH is just another medical institution in Bethesda, Md., that is performing research.

I am not entirely certain of the significance of the finding that the name National Institutes of Health or its acronym, NIH, evokes little recognition. This in itself does not seem to interfere with the public's expressed desire to fund more biomedical research. But many leaders think it is important that the average person have a clear picture of who funds this research directly. Among those leaders is NIH's director, Harold Varmus. Of course, past NIH directors have bemoaned the lack of congressional and public recognition. Yet Varmus has taken an active approach and has done an excellent job of educating members of Congress about

NIH. Unlike the National Aeronautics and Space Administration or other agencies whose mission is rather narrowly focused and more clearly defined, NIH has a much harder public-relations challenge, since its mission covers so many different clinical areas of disease and basic life sciences research.

The low public recognition of NIH made me wonder how the name came into being. Victoria Harden, the NIH historian and director of the institutes' Stetten Museum, explained that in 1930, the Hygienic Laboratory of the Public Health Service was renamed the National Institute of Health as part of a larger bill passing through Congress. Some people at the lab wanted to rename it the Institute for Chemo-Therapeutic Research, but a wise member of Congress rejected the suggestion and sought a name that would reflect a broader mandate. So the National Institute of Health was adopted. Note the singular "Institute." Then in 1948, when the National Heart Institute was created, legislation was passed to change the singular NIH to the plural it is known by today.

Sixty-seven years after the NIH name was adopted, I believe the word "health" is too vague to convey the massive and diverse role of NIH in medical and life sciences research. Perhaps it is hopeless to expect the public to recognize this role without an updated name for NIH. It is relevant to ask now whether a name change is indeed in order.

The name I would suggest is the National Institutes of Medical Research.

While the term "biomedical" might be more accurate in expressing the agency's activities, the narrower name appeals to the public's appreciation of medical research and its clearly documented desire to increase funding for it. We should keep in mind that a significant segment of the public and Congress who are knowledgeable about NIH believes it spends too much on basic research rather than clinical studies.

Not being a Washington insider, I don't know what it would take to effect a name change for NIH-perhaps new legislation or simply a presidential directive. Or it might be accomplished by being tacked on to other legislation, such as the NIH appropriations bill, as long as there is little opposition in Congress. Whatever the government requirements, changing the name of NIH is a subject worthy of consideration and discussion.

As William Shakespeare wrote in *Romeo and Juliet*, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." But compared to the National Institutes of Health, the National Institutes of Medical Research smells far sweeter to me-and is more direct, descriptive, and meaningful to the public and Congress, with whose continued support this rose will flourish.

I invite you to offer your own suggestions to *The Scientist* for a new NIH name. And don't forget to copy your recommendations to your congressional representatives.