

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

December 8, 2003

The Honorable George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

The Honorable Tommy Thompson
The Department of Health and
Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear President Bush and Secretary Thompson:

We are writing to express our deep concern with recent criticisms of the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) scientific decision-making process. We respectfully request that the Administration immediately rebuke these ill-advised critics. Failing to do so, may have profound and potentially disastrous consequences on NIH's long-standing ability to conduct research and clinical trials free of political interference.

NIH must have the freedom to pursue scientific inquiry if researchers are to be expected to find cures and treatments for diseases that cause so much suffering to people all over the world. However, recent calls for a Justice Department investigation into how certain research projects gained funding through the peer-review process and Congressional efforts to prohibit NIH from continuing research on peer-awarded grants threaten the sanctity of this scientific process. While we are pleased that recent Congressional efforts failed, similar proposals will keep reemerging until Republicans and Democrats stand together in support of this long-standing, merit-based system.

We were proud to have worked -- Republicans and Democrats alike -- to double NIH's budget, and continually resist, on a bipartisan basis, the temptation to earmark the Institute's funding toward a specific disease or research project. Although it is ever tempting for Congress to use the power of the purse to influence the work of federal agencies conducting medical research, we strongly believe the NIH grant process should be based on science -- not politics.

Organizations like the Traditional Values Coalition and even some of our respected colleagues have wrongly attempted to single out NIH-funded studies simply because they deemed the subjects morally questionable. Turning a blind eye to creative research efforts will impede our efforts to eradicate pervasive and deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS, stop drug abuse and sexual violence, and abolish depression.

The goal of NIH research is to acquire new knowledge to help prevent, detect, diagnose, and treat disease and disability. Its mission is to uncover new knowledge that will lead to better health for everyone. Effective science requires that researchers not only ask all the relevant questions, but have the resources to study them. If interest


groups espousing a certain political or moral agenda succeed in preventing our leading scientific research institution from exploring all aspects of disease and disease transmission considered scientifically relevant, then the \$27 billion we annually invest in the NIH will be compromised and our efforts to better human health will fail.

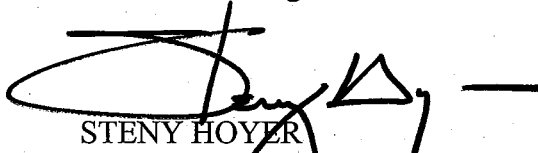
It is also important to note that nearly 70 percent of the applications submitted to NIH fail to receive funding through the peer-review process. This is evidence that only the proposals of the highest scientific merit and those that can yield the most promising information receive federal funds.

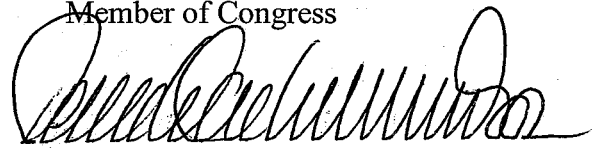
The time has come for Republicans and Democrats to once again cross party lines and unite behind NIH. We urge you not to allow the personal disagreements of a small minority to stunt the ingenious minds of our time and undermine the legitimacy of our greatest scientific research institution. As Democratic members of the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Subcommittee, we hope you will work with us to ensure that scientists, not politicians or interest groups, continue to oversee our efforts to save lives, improve public health and safety, and reduce risky behavior. Thank you and we look forward to your response.

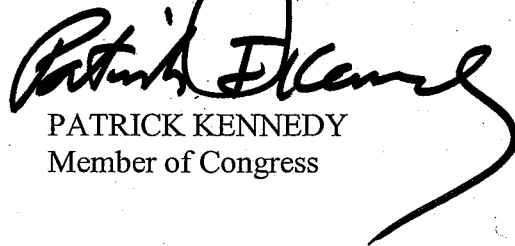
Sincerely,


NITA LOWEY
Member of Congress


ROSA DeLAURO
Member of Congress


STENY HOYER
Member of Congress


JESSE JACKSON
Member of Congress


PATRICK KENNEDY
Member of Congress


LUCILLE ROYBAL-ALLARD
Member of Congress

cc: Dr. Elias Zerhouni