



November 7, 2003

The Honorable Tommy G. Thompson
Secretary of Health and Human Services
U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are writing to express our grave concern about the generation of a list of NIH research grants that has become the subject of a Congressional inquiry based on the concerns of a private organization with ideological beliefs that are at odds with the scientific focus of the studies in question. We respectfully request that you investigate this matter thoroughly and take a public stand in support of the public health value of biomedical and behavioral research aimed at reducing the toll of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, and the integrity of the peer-review process that ensures that only applications of scientific merit receive federal support.

The Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA) is a national medical society that represents more than 7,500 infectious diseases physicians and scientists devoted to patient care, education, research, and community health planning in infectious diseases. The HIV Medicine Association (HIVMA), nested within the IDSA, represents 2,600 physicians and other health care providers who practice HIV medicine. We represent the interests of our patients by advocating for policies that ensure a comprehensive and humane response to the AIDS pandemic informed by science and social justice.

While the level of governmental involvement in the generation of the list remains unclear, we were shocked to hear that NIH staff made calls to the grantees to put them on notice that there were Congressional inquiries about the value of their research projects. Among the grantees are a number of our members and colleagues and the subjects of their research reflect critical areas of scientific inquiry in HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases. Those of us who work in the scientific and medical arenas of HIV/AIDS and other topics that relate to human sexuality and health are accustomed to the opposition of some organizations and members of the public at large to the research on these subjects based on moral and religious grounds. What is new and alarming in this instance is the ability of an organization with a clear ideological agenda to influence officials of the Legislative and Executive branch in ways that threaten the integrity of the scientific enterprise itself.

Last year, the leadership of the HIVMA wrote to you requesting a meeting to discuss domestic prevention policies, among other issues, and to offer our membership as a resource to you and your staff in the development of HIV policies and programs. One of our key concerns then as now was the potential for undue ideological influence that might generate prevention policies that run counter to scientific evidence and best medical practice, as well as potentially ignore the need to target populations at high risk for HIV transmission including men who have sex with men and injection drug users. It is discouraging to see scores of grants on the list. These grants may offer new insights about how to effectively reduce HIV transmission in the U.S. and abroad.

It seems unreasonable that they should be under scrutiny and attack by special interest groups and some politicians with no expertise to judge the scientific merit of such research.

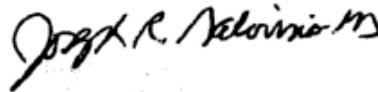
At a meeting you hosted of representatives of HIV/AIDS organizations in September, you and your senior staff assured the group that there was no ideological review of grants submitted to NIH on HIV/AIDS research and that prevention efforts targeted at high-risk populations would continue. We have no doubt about your good intentions, and we have the greatest respect for IDSA members Julie Gerberding, MD, and Anthony Fauci, MD, who serve as leaders in the nation's response to HIV/AIDS in prevention and research.

We do believe, however, that a public message from you to ensure the research community and the public-at-large that the world's flagship research institution, the National Institutes of Health, is committed to making funding decisions based on scientific merit and that the NIH peer-review process is sound, is essential. In our view, such a statement from you and the leaders of the relevant agencies that you oversee will do a great deal to alleviate the concerns of our nation's scientists and to reinforce the government's paramount commitment to protecting the public health. Finally, we would welcome the opportunity to work more closely with you and your staff and to offer the experience and expertise of our members in furthering the mission of the NIH and its sister agencies.

Sincerely yours,



Paul A. Volberding, MD
Chairman of the Board of Directors
HIV Medicine Association



Joseph R. Dalovisio, MD
President
Infectious Diseases Society of America