

US scientists sound alarm over animal research

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As the NIH forges ahead with a plan to speed up the way scientific discoveries are transformed into treatments and cures, animal researchers say they are being overlooked in the rush to create a new institute devoted to something they already do.

And some are concerned that the changes could incur large startup costs at a time when Congress is aiming to pare back science budgets.

The NIH, which funnels 31 billion dollars per year into medical research, is considering an advisory panel recommendation to create a new center for turning lab advances into practical health solutions for the public, also known as translational medicine.

The proposed National Center for Advancing Translational Research (NCATS) would include a new initiative from President Barack Obama's [health care reform](#) plan, the Cures Acceleration Network, as well as other programs devoted to [rare diseases](#) and special award grants.

But it leaves out about half of a 1.3-billion-dollar program that funds the nation's eight primate centers and a series of other research programs, known as the National Center for Research Resources (NCRR).

According to NIH guidelines, the creation of a new center means an existing one will have to be cut.

Some scientists are worried the changes could affect as many as 30,000 researchers who rely on about 500 million dollars in funding for things like salaries, building research facilities, veterinarian training and key resources like [fruit flies](#), worms, [mutant mice](#) and [rats](#) that are pooled among many.

Mark Lively, a scientist at Wake Forest University in North Carolina who is a member of the NCRR advisory board, said most people agree with the NIH's goal of speeding discoveries to patients.

"Our position was 'slow down guys, we are going too fast, there are too many questions,'" Lively told AFP.

"Everyone I have spoken to at NIH, other directors of other institutes, are just astounded at the pace," he said.

"They are busily putting together a budget, standing it up as an entity yet they don't even have a mission statement that is publicly available. It is all being done very quickly. Very, very quickly," he said.

"The motivation for creating this was not to save money, period," he added. "I would guess that it is going to cost more money."

Lively said NIH wants the new center to be included in the budget for fiscal year 2012, which Obama is to announce in February of this year.

"Behind the scenes, the working groups that are evaluating various options clearly have in mind eliminating the NCRP by simply distributing its programs to other places," he said.

The NIH declined AFP requests for comment. "The Translational Science Center is still under consideration so NIH has nothing to say at this time," said spokeswoman Jenny Haliski.

Hundreds of concerned scientists have posted comments to the NIH website, asking the government not to dismantle the NCRP, or to at least include all of its programs in the new center.

Most do not oppose the new center; they just want to be a part of it.

"It is quite clear that the commitment to some of these programs will change depending on what institute they are in or what center they get put in," said Linda Cork, a professor of comparative medicine at Stanford University.

"The question is where will they have a home that has a commitment to providing for them?"

Cork was among many scientists who circulated emails urging colleagues

to weigh in on the changes.

Scientists at eight national primate centers that study a range of diseases and conditions -- including AIDS, autism, Alzheimer's, malaria, cancer, infertility, heart disease, stem cell therapies, tuberculosis and West Nile virus -- in species such as rhesus macaques, baboons, squirrel monkeys and others, posted a joint letter appealing to be included in the new center.

"It is important that the (primate centers') long-standing and ongoing central role in translational research be recognized and incorporated into the new NIH translational medicine program," it said.

NIH director Francis Collins told the journal Nature last month that he did not aim to eliminate animal research funding or other programs in NCR.

"There is no intention here to dismantle them," he said. "Dollars for biomedical research are going to be very hard to come by in the next year or two. But that can't be a reason to stop promoting innovation."

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