

OFFICE OF BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH

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Mission:

The Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) furthers the mission of NIH by emphasizing the role that behavioral and social factors and their interaction with biomedical variables play in health. The three main goals of the Office are to: (1) enhance behavioral and social sciences research and training; (2) integrate a biobehavioral perspective across NIH; and (3) improve communication among health scientists and with the public. Specifically, the major responsibilities of the Office include:

- Providing leadership and direction to increase the scope of and support for behavioral and social sciences research and training at the NIH;
- Advising key NIH officials on matters relating to behavioral and social sciences research;
- Serving as the principal spokesperson on the importance of behavioral and social sciences research in the acquisition, treatment, and prevention of disease and disability;
- Stimulating research in the behavioral and social sciences and interdisciplinary research;
- Providing leadership in disseminating findings from behavioral and social sciences research; and
- Sponsoring seminars, workshops, and conferences at the NIH and at national and international scientific meetings on behavioral and social sciences research.

Selected Achievements and New Initiatives:

Expanding the Initiative on Mind-Body Interactions and Health: The Public Health Service has documented that many of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in the U.S. are attributable to social, behavioral and lifestyle factors. Numerous studies have also documented that psychological stress is also linked to a variety of health outcomes, including heart disease and decreased immune system functioning, and researchers and public health officials are becoming increasingly interested in understanding the nature of this relationship. In FY 1999, the NIH issued a Request for Applications (RFA) for Centers for Mind-Body Interactions and Health and subsequently awarded five P50 Center Grants. In anticipation of the termination of these grants in FY 2004, OBSSR, in cooperation with NIH institutes and centers, issued two RFAs for *Mind-Body and Health Research Infrastructure or Development Programs*, and a third RFA for regular research grants. These RFAs resulted in the awarding of six center-like grants and six smaller developmental grants, as well as 12 research grants.

Health Literacy: *Health People 2010* established a national health objective to improve health literacy by the decade's end. The HHS initiative defines health literacy as the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to both make

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appropriate health decisions and use such information and services to enhance health. As the sharing of relevant health information and the active participation in health care and health promotion efforts are dependent on health literacy, strengthening health literacy is a means to increase quality and years of healthy life and to eliminate health disparities. While many diseases and conditions can be prevented or controlled, too often people with the greatest health burdens have few fact-finding skills and the least access to health information. Moreover, health care providers may not be able to communicate effectively with these individuals. In 2004, OBSSR and several institutes and centers issued a Program Announcement for research to increase the scientific understanding of the nature of the health literacy problem and its relationship to disparities in health outcomes and health communications problems and to test interventions to overcome the adverse consequences of low health literacy.

Genetics, Social Environments, and Health: In-depth understanding of pathways to disease and preservation of good health necessitates the study of environmentally induced gene expression. Whether a particular gene is expressed and the degree to which it is expressed depends strongly on the physical and social environmental conditions experienced by the organism. Very little is known about how various characteristics of the social environment affect gene expression. Scientifically, the key task is to define the pathways that lead to disease. This requires, first, understanding how genes and related factors might be associated with the onset of particular disease outcomes, and second, tracking relevant mediating conditions. OBSSR and the National Human Genome Research Institute, leaders of trans-NIH efforts to identify barriers and opportunities for promoting research on “gene by social-environment” interactions, collaborated with the National Institute of General Medical Sciences to support an Institute of Medicine study on the state of science on gene-environment interactions, with a focus on social environments. The study will identify approaches and strategies to strengthen the integration of social, behavioral, and genetic research in this field and will address methodological issues, identify research gaps, recommend priorities for NIH research, and assess workforce, resource, and infrastructure needs.

Social and Behavioral Research on Health Disparities: OBSSR is leading a trans-NIH effort to convene a scientific conference on social and behavioral factors in health disparities. The goals of the conference are to (1) highlight the actual and potential contributions of behavioral and social sciences to NIH’s mission of reducing disparities in health, and (2) to identify areas requiring increased conceptual, empirical, and methodological development. The conference, to be held in FY 2006, will consist of a public conference and a private consultation session.