



THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF
IMMUNOLOGISTS

August 14, 2015

**Response of the American Association of Immunologists (AAI) to the NIH Request
for Information: Inviting Comments and Suggestions on a Framework for
the NIH-wide Strategic Plan**

<http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-15-118.html>

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- **Potential benefits, drawbacks/challenges, and areas of consideration for the current framework**

The American Association of Immunologists (AAI), the largest professional association of immunologists in the world, representing more than 7,600 basic and clinical immunologists, appreciates this opportunity to submit comments to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) “Request for Information (RFI): Inviting Comments and Suggestions on a Framework for the NIH-wide Strategic Plan.”

AAI strongly suggests that NIH address areas where Congress can assist NIH in achieving its mission, including the need for Congressional action to 1) ensure predictable and sustained increases to NIH funding, 2) enable NIH to carry over unused funds from previous years, and 3) lift the travel restrictions limiting the attendance of government scientists at scientific conferences. Without progress on these issues, NIH will continue to struggle to advance in many important areas, including workforce sustainability and stewardship responsibilities.

- **Compatibility of the framework with the broad scope of the NIH mission**

AAI agrees that the framework of this proposed plan supports the NIH mission, and especially appreciates its emphasis on basic research, the critical foundation of prevention, treatment, and cures. In addition to stating that basic research often results in unpredictable discoveries, the plan should include examples of basic research discoveries that led to unexpected improvements in human or animal health. NIH should emphasize that while there is not always a clear connection between basic research and disease, this does not make such research any less useful or urgent; a lack of connection may, however, make it more difficult for

scientists to explain the importance of basic research to those who insist that all biomedical research have a direct impact on disease. The plan should also reiterate the core reason that NIH must maintain a robust basic research portfolio: if the federal government doesn't support such research, the private sector cannot not fill the void.

- **Additional concepts in ICO strategic plans that are cross-cutting and should be included in the trans-NIH strategic plan**

Vaccines and adjuvants, which are essential to the prevention and treatment of contagious and/or chronic diseases, are a focus of the NIAID strategic plan and are a cross-cutting area of opportunity that should be included in the “Improve Health Promotion and Disease Prevention” and “Advance Treatments and Cures” sections. Traditional vaccines, which prepare the immune system for future encounters with infectious diseases, are being complemented by the discovery and development of immunotherapeutics, which can boost the immune system and facilitate the destruction of cancer cells and are in clinical trials to treat Alzheimer’s disease, diabetes, and Ebola infection.

- **Comprehensive trans-NIH research themes that have not been captured in the Areas of Opportunity that Apply Across Biomedicine**

“NIH’s mission is to seek fundamental knowledge about the nature and behavior of living systems and the application of that knowledge to enhance health, lengthen life, and reduce illness and disability.”(<http://www.nih.gov/about/mission.htm>). Because the immune system plays a critical role in the detection and clearance of disease, and is essential for the healthy functioning of most organ systems, immunological research should be a cross-cutting theme that is highlighted in the trans-NIH strategic plan. For example, researchers continue to demonstrate that inflammation and immune processes are key contributors to a variety of diseases and degenerative conditions, including acute and chronic infections, cancer, metabolic disease, neurological disorders, osteoporosis, and heart disease.

- **Future opportunities or emerging research needs**

NIH must continue to address the need to recruit and retain young scientists, since the current funding situation has deeply discouraged many graduate students and postdoctoral fellows who wish to pursue careers in biomedical research (particularly those interested in pursuing an academic track). While NIH has taken some steps to improve the funding opportunities for early stage investigators, NIH should continue to make the sustainability of the early and mid-career workforce a top priority.