

A political attack on peer review

Research aimed at finding effective treatments for mental illness is self-evidently a good idea. Unfortunately, this noble aim is now being used in a disingenuous attempt to reduce the funding of basic neuroscience research by the US National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). It may seem obvious to neuroscientists that before we can learn how to fix the brain, we need to know how it works, but we have failed to communicate this message effectively to the public. If we are to maintain taxpayer support for basic research, scientists need to do a better job of explaining its benefits.

In June, the House of Representatives approved an amendment seeking to withhold funding from two successfully peer-reviewed projects at NIMH. The amendment was attached to the annual appropriations bill for the National Institutes of Health, which funds most neuroscience research in the US. One of the threatened grants deals with visual perception in pigeons; the other is a study on how psychological traits contribute to successful marriages. The proposal to withhold funds from these studies was submitted by Republican Congressman Randy Neugebauer, a real estate developer who represents a district in northwestern Texas centered around the town of Lubbock. In a press release, Neugebauer states that the research “fails to contribute to the effort to find cures for Alzheimer’s, autism, or any other serious mental health disease”, and is therefore undeserving of taxpayer money allocated to the NIMH.

Why would the Congressman feel the need to second-guess the outcome of NIMH’s famously stringent peer review process? (The institute funds only about 15% of research grant proposals it receives.) And why zero in on these two particular grants among all the basic neuroscience grants that are slated for NIMH funding in the upcoming fiscal year? Neugebauer was not available for comment, but his press secretary Josh Noland assured us that the Congressman “supports the peer review process” and is aware that it “serves a very good purpose” but, of course, “it’s not perfect.” In reality, however, the amendment is disrespectful and damaging to the peer review process. If Neugebauer is serious about supporting peer review, he should withdraw his amendment.

He seems unlikely to do so, given that he played the same game last year, attempting to prohibit NIMH from funding two grants proposing to study people’s self-expression and value systems. Last year’s Neugebauer amendment was stripped from the appropriations bill in the US Senate, the upper house of Congress. This year’s Neugebauer amendment will probably suffer the same fate—as it should.

The mental health lobbying group Treatment Advocacy Center (TAC) has supported Neugebauer’s amendments. TAC founder E. Fuller Torrey, a prominent psychiatrist and prolific author, once worked for the NIMH, but since quitting in 1975 has relentlessly attacked the institute for allegedly squandering funds on basic research that he considers irrelevant to serious mental disorders. The two grants targeted in last year’s Neugebauer amendment were taken

from a 2003 TAC report attacking NIMH’s research portfolio. In contrast to Neugebauer’s proclaimed support for scientific peer review, Torrey seems to consider peer review at NIMH a corrupt old boys’ network. He recently wrote in an opinion piece for the Wall Street Journal that “cronism and scientific correctness are rampant” on NIMH grant review panels.

Torrey’s advocacy on behalf of severely ill people and his efforts to encourage more clinical research on mental illness are commendable. But despite what he and Neugebauer claim, NIMH’s mandate is not limited to applied research into possible cures for mental illnesses. NIMH Director Thomas Insel, while noting that he values Torrey’s opinions, cautions that much more basic research on the brain and behavior needs to be done before we can rationally tackle the psychiatric diseases. Insel has been asked to testify about NIMH’s role in mental illness research in a series of congressional hearings this fall, and also says he would be happy to sit down with Neugebauer to discuss the issues.

It has long been recognized by policymakers, in all fields of science, that no one can predict where the next breakthrough is going to come from. It therefore makes sense to fund basic research broadly, and, given the reality of limited funds, it is the task of peer review panels to select the most promising among proposed projects. The idea that a real estate developer would make a final judgment on the scientific merits of specific NIMH projects is as bizarre as it would be to suggest that NIMH scientists ought to determine the amount of tax money assigned to their coffers.

Neugebauer may believe he is on a crusade against wasteful spending at NIMH, but his amendments ridicule serious science and respectable scientists, and, most importantly, they represent an outright attack on the peer review process. Of course this is not the first political attack on NIH funding of studies that straddle neuro- and social sciences—recall the attempt two years ago by Representatives Toomey and Chocola to withdraw funding from peer-reviewed projects dealing with human sexual behaviors and AIDS.

This dangerous trend of political interference with peer review may gain steam unless scientists counteract it with reinforced lobbying and public relations work of their own. It seems easy to make fun of pigeons, but next year a representative might take aim at gerbils or the Sonic hedgehog protein—after all, it is not immediately obvious how research on early brain development contributes to curing bipolar disease or schizophrenia. Indeed, all of neuroscience is potentially in the crosshairs here. Thus the community, in Insel’s words, has “a solemn obligation” to explain its principles and procedures, including the peer review system and the necessity for basic research, to politicians and the public.

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