

National Institute of Neurological Disorders & Stroke

Workforce Plan: FY 2002-2003

What skills are vital to the accomplishment of the agency's goals and objectives?

The opportunities for discovering treatments and cures for neurological disorders have never been better. Every day we hear about exciting discoveries relating to Parkinson's disease, stroke, brain tumors, epilepsy and many other fatal or debilitating disorders. Exploiting this opportunity requires an extremely high quality workforce, with the requisite skills to implement the institute's vision and strategy – particularly in leading the broader neuroscience community, creating a new collaborative model for how modern neuroscience research should be conducted, and increasing the pace at which research is translated into effective therapies.

The NINDS strategic planning process focused on the major topics in contemporary neuroscience and laid the groundwork for numerous initiatives during the past two years. For example, last year's Parkinson's Disease Research Agenda was the first in a series of disease-focused plans, that now also includes brain tumor research (with NCI), epilepsy and stroke. Implementation of these plans requires hiring of additional staff, including scientists with expertise in the emerging areas of bioinformatics and proteomics. We also need staff well versed in translational research to help span the gap between basic and clinical research. And we are in the process of strengthening our clinical trials program to promote excellent and safe clinical research protocols. However, our needs are not limited to scientific staff. There is an increased need for grant and contract specialists to ensure our oversight and fiduciary responsibilities.

For our on-campus labs, our vision is to create a collaborative model for how modern neuroscience research should be conducted – something that the extramural academic community has said that NIH is uniquely positioned to demonstrate. We are guided by three principles – excellence, integration and efficiency. NIH is integrating its neuroscience programs from nine Institutes in the John Porter Neuroscience Research Center. Prior to completion of the building, we are establishing shared equipment facilities for use by all neuroscientists to promote a culture of collaboration and efficient use of resources. These include DNA and peptide sequencing, light and electron microscopy, and computational support for imaging. We are also recruiting several senior investigators in collaboration with other neuroscience institutes. And we continue to aggressively prune programs that are not scientifically excellent through a process of external peer review.

What changes are expected in the work of the agency (e.g. due to changes in mission/goals, technology, new/terminated programs or functions, and contracting out)? How will this affect the agency's human resources? What skills will no longer be required, and what new skills will the agency need in the next five years?

Scientifically, the pace of discovery in neuroscience is staggering. We need to be flexible to get in and out of various disciplines. This requires flexible hiring mechanisms, greater use of term appointments to allow rapid shifts into new science areas, and organizational structures that can change easily with the science.

Administratively, we expect that more work will be facilitated by the use of information technology (i.e. IMPAC II, EHRP) over the next five years. The need for staff to input and extract data will decrease, while the need for analytical skills will increase. As work is contracted out, we will need to determine the proper mix Government and contract staff, and plan for retraining and/or placement services for affected staff. For example, we have begun the process of contracting out our animal care services, and have begun to retrain and place staff elsewhere in the organization.

How is the agency addressing expected skill imbalances due to attrition, including retirements over the next five years?

Over the past five years our attrition rate has run about 8 or 9 percent. For some organizations this may seem high. For NINDS, this is a positive development. It allows for a renewal and revitalization of scientific programs, introduction of new ideas and skills, and a vibrant and creative atmosphere for research. The number of people eligible for retirement increases slightly over the next five years, but we do not expect the rate of retirement to change drastically. Our plan takes these numbers into account. But it also assumes that we cannot just replace those who leave, but must continue to grow in certain programmatic areas to exploit opportunities.

What recruitment, training and retention strategies are being implemented to help ensure that the agency has and will continue to have a high quality, diverse work force?

While we are cognizant of the "brain drain", we believe our institute offers an excellent value proposition to prospective candidates – and hence are not worried by our current turnover rate or pending retirements. The NINDS hiring process is as rigorous as any in the United States, public or private. We have an absolute standard with regards to the quality of staff, and will not compromise these standards to fill a position based on urgency. Each hire, whether a secretary, scientist, or an executive, is interviewed by at least 6 and as many as 15 staff. We actively use the NIH intern programs. While pay can be an issue, we use the full flexibilities available when recruiting outstanding scientists. And professional development is one of the highest priority areas in NINDS. For example, we instituted a world-class, two-year leadership development program for 50 senior managers to develop leadership at all levels of the organization.

What challenges impede the agency's ability to recruit and retain a high quality diverse work force?

We face two large challenges. First, since most of our scientific hires come from the academic sector, it is critical to overcome the perception that the Government / NIH is bureaucratic and slow. This is a very significant and not to be underestimated in recruitment. NIH works very hard to minimize both the perception and reality. Second, we need a personnel system that is fast and flexible – which for the most part, we have that now.

Where has the agency successfully delegated authority or restructured to reduce the number of layers that a programmatic action passes through before it reaches an authoritative decision point? Where can the agency improve its processes to reduce the number of layers that a programmatic action passes through before it reaches an authoritative decision point?

Over the past three years NINDS has reduced management layers. In Extramural, we abolished the functional divisions (and the SES division chiefs) in favor of self-managed work teams that are organized around the scientific themes found in the NINDS strategic plan). This has resulted in greater communication and collaboration. In the Division of Intramural Research, new investigators are given independent sections rather than being subsumed into an existing Lab/Branch structure, thus reducing the number of supervisory positions. Our overall supervisory to staff ratio is 1:13. In most of our 1,000-person organization, a staff member is only separated from the Institute Director by one, or at most two, people. Approvals for actions need only one or two signatures, and a system of management controls and policies are in place to ensure prudent stewardship.

NINDS has taken advantage of other Institutes' expertise and efficiencies in administrative areas. For example, we purchase technology transfer services and acquisition support from NCI. We are also exploring combining administrative support with NIMH (the other major neuroscience Institute) in several areas – grants, IT and shared administrative support in the new Porter Neuroscience Research Center. We understand that the Department's emphasis on consolidation in areas such as HR, Public Information, and Legislative Affairs will also have an impact on our staffing. However, we believe that expertise in these areas will still be necessary to advise the Director and provide critical services.

What barriers (statutory, administrative, physical or cultural) has the agency identified to achieving workforce restructuring?

Change is hard and NINDS has undergone a substantial amount over the past few years. The only additional tool, which would be helpful, is selected authority for early retirement and buyouts to achieve restructuring.

NINDS Hiring Plans for FYs 2002/2003

	FY 2002	FY 2003	Total
INTRAMURAL			
Senior Investigators ¹	0	0	0
Investigators ¹	0	0	0
Other MD/PhDs, in FTE positions	11	0	11
Other MD/PhDs in non-FTE positions (IRTA, VF)	10	4	14
Other lab/clinical staff => GS-13	0	0	0
Other lab/clinical staff =< GS-12	3	0	3
Admin/support staff => GS-13	0	0	0
Admin/support staff =< GS-12	0	0	0
Infrastructure support => GS-13	1	0	1
Infrastructure support =< GS-12 ²	0	0	0
Summer and other temps not listed above (include summer IRTAs)	101	102	203
TOTAL INTRAMURAL	126	106	232
EXTRAMURAL			
HSAs/SRAs and other senior level science administrators => GS-13	18	13	31
Other science administration positions =< GS-12	0	0	0
Grants Management and R&D Contract Staff => GS-13 ³	7	9	16
Grants Management and R&D Contract Staff =< GS-12 ³	6	1	7
Administrative and support staff => GS-13	0	0	0
Administrative and support staff =< GS-12	11	9	20
Infrastructure support => GS-13	3	0	3
Infrastructure support =< GS-12 ²	6	2	8
Summer and other temps not listed above	8	7	15
TOTAL EXTRAMURAL	59	41	100
IC TOTAL	185	147	332
¹ Using OIR professional designations			
² Include all wage grade positions related to infrastructure in this group			
³ Includes 1101, 1102, 301 and 303 series where individual is engaged in these activities on a full-time basis.			