Description

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) funds a large portion of the biomedical research in the United States. Biological research helps advance innovation, create cures or treatments for diseases, and positively affects the economy. However, over the past decade funding for NIH has consistently reduced, losing 22% of its funding capacity due to budget cuts, sequestration, and the impact of inflation. This obviously restricts the ability of NIH to provide research grants, which in turn results in fewer biomedical breakthroughs. This kind of pressure on the NIH budget may have been a part of the reason that representatives of the U.S. academic leadership recently attended a White House meeting to discuss the future of NIH and the government's plans to fund the NIH budget.

Research Funding Trends

Arbitrary spending caps on biomedical research funding enacted by the Budget Control Act in 2011 are stifling innovation. NIH research funding trends are particularly important since this body funds more than 300,000 research scientists and have supported 149 Nobel Laureates since 1939. Federal support of NIH has enabled the development of vaccines for Hepatitis A and Ebola, raised the prostate cancer five-year survival rate to 99%, and resulted in promising advances in the fight against antibiotic resistance. This has made the United States a world leader in biomedical research, however, there is concern that this position could be overtaken by Asian countries whose overall research spending has increased from 27% in 2003 to 40% a decade later.

Restoring the Budget

In light of the impact of research on health and the economy, the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB) has recommended that biomedical research funding be increased. FASEB has recommended that the NIH budget be at least $35 billion in the 2018 financial year. It has also recommended that the National Science Foundation (NSF) has a budget of at least $8 billion and the Department of Energy Office of Science has a budget of $5.8 billion.

Initially, the Trump administration had declared an intention to decrease federal support of the NIH. A proposed decrease in support for biological research by cutting the NIH budget by $1 billion in 2017 was opposed by Congress. This budget was later raised by $2 billion. Trump has proposed a 2018 budget that includes a decrease in U.S. biomedical research funding, including a $5.8 billion decrease

in the NIH budget. It is hoped that a recent two hour White House meeting with academic leadership and biotech executives may persuade the President to consider restoring the budget.

After summarizing the impact of the NIH on improving health and its contribution to the economy, the biotech executives present explained that private investment could not cover the gap in support for basic research that would exist if the budget were to be further decreased. The White House meeting attendees also pointed out that recent immigration policy changes mean that foreign research talent is either choosing to stay away from positions in the US or choosing to leave the US for opportunities elsewhere.

The Future of Biomedical Research

The impact of biomedical research on the discovery of a cure for diseases and the economy cannot be denied. The support that the NIH budget provides for research and innovation needs further strengthening. However, the current administration has not shared this view and has proposed a decrease in biomedical research funding. Between 2003 and 2015, NIH research funding trends have indicated a steady decline in the ability to support research activities across the country. Only time will tell if this White House meeting had the desired effect. In the meantime, the fate of thousands of researchers remains uncertain.

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Date Created
2017/09/06
Author
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