

FOVA

Friends of VA Medical Care and
Health Research

A coalition of national
organizations committed to
quality care for America's
veterans

Executive Committee

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**Statement of the
Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA)
House Veterans, Housing and Urban Develop and Independent Agencies Appropriations
Subcommittee
Hearing on the
FY 2005 Budget of the Department of Veterans Affairs Research Program
Submitted by
Galen B. Toews, MD
on
March 25, 2004**

The Friends of VA Medical Care and Health Research (FOVA), a coalition of 79 medical research, specialty, physician, academic, patient advocacy and industry organizations committed to quality care for veterans, is pleased to provide recommendations regarding FY 2005 funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical and prosthetics research program. **FOVA strongly encourages the Committee on Veterans Affairs to support an FY 2005 appropriation of at least \$460 million for the direct costs of the VA research program and \$45 million for research facility improvements.**

FOVA's FY 2005 recommendations build on the increase provided for the current year. FOVA thanks the members of the Committee for their strong leadership in ensuring a positive final outcome of \$405 million for FY 2004. This represents a \$7.6 million (1.9 %) increase over the previous year and we urge to the Subcommittee to support continued, steady growth in the annual appropriation.

We are extremely concerned that the Bush Administration and Department of Veterans Affairs have recommended a cut in direct support for the VA research program. The Administration budget calls for a \$20 million (5%) cut in VA research support. The Administration budget makes an unrealistic assumption that the VA program will off set the \$20 million cut with an additional \$110 million (14%) in new non-VA research funding. FOVA finds the Administration's assumption of \$110 million in new non-VA funding to be highly unrealistic.

FOVA's recommended funding level of \$460 million allows overall growth of \$54.4 million (13.4%) over FY 2004. An increase of this size is justified by the need to accommodate biomedical research inflation and federal pay increases as well as a major new initiative in deployment health research and expansion in areas such as terrorism, emerging pathogens, special populations, quality improvement, chronic diseases and diseases of the brain.

The core needs justify the FOVA recommendation of \$460 million:

Deployment Health: Study the potential long-term effects of exposure and risk factors among veterans of hazardous deployments, such as the Gulf War, Bosnia/Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. VA will also place particular emphasis on developing new treatments for veterans suffering from ALS after the Gulf War. Moreover, VA will develop preventative medicine efforts for future deployments.

Rehabilitation: Develop BION technology, a general-purpose neural/muscular stimulator used to treat paralysis and restore function in limbs. VA also plans to enhance vocational rehabilitation programs for veterans by funding studies on mental illness and substance abuse.

Quality Improvement: Fund the Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI) program and other efforts to support work to ensure appropriate, high-quality care for veterans with prostate cancer and dementias. VA plans to expand QUERI programs to focus on stroke rehabilitation, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and amputation.

Chronic Diseases: Continue, in part through its Research Enhancement Awards Programs (REAPs), work in understanding the prevalence as well as cost and outcomes of treatment for pulmonary, kidney, and heart diseases, diabetes, hepatitis C, and stroke. VA will also work to develop new treatments for these ailments and other chronic diseases.

Diseases of the Brain: Study rehabilitation of stroke victims and increase support for researchers working on Alzheimer's disease and other dementias and Parkinson's disease.

The complexity of research combined with biomedical research inflation has increased the costs of research. The average cost of each VA research project is now \$150,000, a 9% increase in just two years. As a result, VA requires an increase of at least \$15 million just to maintain a stable number of programs.

VA Research Facilities Improvement: \$45 million

Separate from its recommendations for the VA research appropriation, FOVA strongly encourages the Committee to address the increasingly urgent need for improvements in VA's research facilities by recommending a specific allocation of \$45 million for these needs. FOVA applauds the Subcommittee for its continuing efforts to provide funds for VA research space rehabilitation. However, the House language continues to be dropped in conference, leaving no funds for research space rehabilitation.

During a hearing in April 2002, FOVA and the Association of American Medical Colleges made a compelling case for urgently needed upgrades to improve both patient and staff safety, and to accommodate state-of-the-art research.

Examples of urgently needed upgrades to ensure safety include the following:

- When an animal facility is too small, investigators bring the animals into their regular laboratories, exposing themselves and staff to occupational illnesses. OSHA inspectors have expressed concerns and, in one case, said that if it were up to OSHA, the building would be shut down.

- During an annual inspection in Iowa City, a fire marshal recommended that research laboratories no longer be housed in one building because the building lacks fire sensors and a sprinkler system.
- Back-up generators are needed to ensure safe temperatures in animal facilities on hot days in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
- During a hazardous materials drill, the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, fire department spread banana oil to mimic a toxic spill. Within 15 minutes, oil applied on the 4th floor of the research building was identified on the 2nd and 4th floors of the adjoining patient care facility.

Examples of improvements needed to accommodate research include:

- A researcher in Seattle, Washington, received a grant that requires storing tissue samples in sub-zero freezers. Space was allocated, but the facility was unable to provide \$30,000 to upgrade the electrical system to support the freezers.
- VA researchers in Gainesville, Florida, are unable to conduct certain types of research because their “wet lab” countertops are made of particleboard and Formica, rather than the standard stone, and are easily burned and stained from exposure to heat and chemicals.
- At the Southern Arizona VA Health Care System in Tucson, they spend precious resources outsourcing kennels for dogs because no funding is available to bring the existing VA kennels into line with AAALAC or FDA standards.

Substandard facilities make VA a less attractive partner in research collaborations with affiliated universities; reduce VA's ability to leverage the R&D appropriation with other federal and private sector funding; and make it difficult to attract cutting edge researchers, both clinician investigators and laboratory scientists, to pursue careers in VA. Facility R&D Committees regularly disapprove projects for funding consideration because the facility does not have the necessary infrastructure and has little prospect of acquiring it.

Under the current system, research must compete with other medical facility and clinical needs for basic infrastructure and physical plant support. Unfortunately, the minor construction appropriation is chronically inadequate to meet facility needs for clinical improvements much less research upgrades, and year after year the list of urgently needed research repairs and upgrades grows longer. VA has identified 18 sites in urgent need of minor construction funding to upgrade their research facilities. These sites, plus the many facilities with smaller, but no less important needs, provide more than sufficient justification for an appropriation of \$45 million specifically for research facility improvements.

FOVA thanks the Committee for consideration of its views. For questions or additional information, please contact any member of the FOVA executive committee listed on this letterhead. Thank you for your consideration.

FOVA Membership

1. Administrators of Internal Medicine
2. Alliance for Academic Internal Medicine
3. Alliance for Aging Research
4. Alzheimer's Association
5. American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
6. American Academy of Neurology
7. American Academy of Ophthalmology
8. American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases
9. American Association of Anatomists
10. American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy
11. American Association of Spinal Cord Injury Nurses
12. American Association of Spinal Cord Injury Psychologists and Social Workers
13. American College of Chest Physicians
14. American College of Clinical Pharmacology
15. American College of Physicians
16. American College of Rheumatology
17. American Congress of Rehabilitation Medicine
18. American Dental Education Association
19. American Diabetes Association
20. American Federation for Medical Research
21. American Gastroenterological Association
22. American Geriatrics Society
23. American Heart Association
24. American Hospital Association
25. American Lung Association
26. American Military Retirees Association
27. American Optometric Association
28. American Osteopathic Association
29. American Paraplegia Society
30. American Physiological Society
31. American Podiatric Medical Association
32. American Psychiatric Association
33. American Psychological Association
34. American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics
35. American Society of Hematology
36. American Society of Nephrology
37. American Therapeutic Recreation Association
38. American Thoracic Society
39. Association for Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care International
40. Association of Academic Health Centers
41. Association of Academic Psychiatrists
42. Association of American Medical Colleges
43. Association of Professors of Medicine
44. Association of Program Directors in Internal Medicine
45. Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry
46. Association of Subspecialty Professors
47. Association of VA Chiefs of Medicine
48. Blinded Veterans Association
49. Blue Star Mothers of America
50. Clerkship Directors in Internal Medicine
51. Coalition for American Trauma Care
52. Coalition for Health Services Research
53. Digestive Disease National Coalition
54. Gerontological Society of America
55. Hepatitis Foundation International
56. Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation International
57. Legion of Valor of the USA, Inc.
58. Medical Device Manufacturers Association
59. Medicine-Pediatrics Program Directors Association
60. Military Officers Association of America
61. National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
62. National Association for the Advancement of Orthotics and Prosthetics
63. National Association for Uniformed Services
64. National Association of VA Dermatologists
65. National Association of Veterans' Research and Education Foundations
66. National Multiple Sclerosis Society
67. National Organization of Rare Disorders
68. Nurses Organization of Veterans Affairs
69. Paralyzed Veterans of America
70. Paralyzed Veterans of America Spinal Cord Research Foundation
71. Parkinsons Action Network
72. Research!America
73. Society for Neuroscience
74. Society for Women's Health Research
75. Society of General Internal Medicine
76. The Endocrine Society
77. United Spinal Association
78. Veterans of the Vietnam War, Inc.
79. Washington Home Center for Palliative Care Studies

VA Research – Recent Achievements

New Antibiotic Improves Treatment of Diabetic Foot Infections

Foot infections are a leading cause of diabetic-related hospitalizations and can result in amputation when infections fail to respond to therapy. In a study conducted by researchers at the Puget Sound VA and the University of Washington School of Medicine, a new antibiotic, linezolid, has been shown to be as effective as older therapies at treating antibiotic-resistant bacteria. In addition, linezolid can be delivered orally as well as intravenously, making it ideal for outpatient use. (Jan. 2004)

Inexpensive Schizophrenia Drug Equally Effective

Researchers at the New Haven VA and Yale University Medical School found that haloperidol, an inexpensive schizophrenia drug, when taken with another drug to minimize side effects, is as effective as olanzapine, one of the new class of atypical antipsychotic schizophrenia drugs, at reducing symptoms and improving quality of life. While researchers do not anticipate stopping prescriptions of the more expensive therapy, questions have been raised about the associated costs, which may run as high as \$9,000 per patient. (Nov. 2003)

Cognitive Behavior Therapy and Exercise Improve Gulf War Veterans Symptoms

In the first major treatment trial of Gulf War veterans reporting serious health problems, VA and Department of Defense researchers have found that cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) and aerobic exercise improve physical and mental functioning, cognitive symptoms, fatigue and distress of Gulf War veterans' illnesses. The results of the study were immediately distributed to the physicians nationwide who concentrate on treating Gulf War veterans. (March 2003)

VA-developed Oral Smallpox Drug Named Top Five Developments in Medical Technology

VA scientists at the San Diego Healthcare System, in conjunction with the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases and the University of Alabama, Birmingham, have developed an oral smallpox drug that stops the spread of the disease in mice. While the drug will need additional study before testing in human clinical trials is possible, the breakthrough was named one of the five most promising developments in medical technology for 2002 by *Popular Science*. (Dec. 2002)

'BION' microchips may one day help patients regain muscular control

VA Rehabilitation Research and Development is collaborating with the Alfred E. Mann Foundation to explore Bionic Neuron (BION) technology - wireless, implantable microchips about the size of a grain of rice that deliver regulated electrical pulses. The BIONs interact with muscles and activate nerves. This cutting-edge therapy could help improve functioning in veterans being treated for motor rehabilitation, bowel and bladder control, swallowing difficulties, and many other conditions. (Nov. 2002)

COPD Results from Constantly Changing Bacteria

Researchers at the Buffalo VAMC have found that populations of infectious bacteria change constantly in the lungs of patients with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). This study ends decades of controversy and may explain why healthy immune systems cannot prevent these recurring infections. (Aug. 2002)